

Breathe: transformative leadership coaching in a complex world

Executive coach **Samreen McGregor** explores the intersection of spirituality, somatic practices and conscious leadership, and demonstrates how an holistic approach can help leaders develop resilience in today's increasingly chaotic and complex world

Today, leaders face unprecedented complexity. The demands of a hyper-connected, fast-paced environment, compounded by socio-economic challenges, often lead to a sense of overwhelm, emotional strain and, paradoxically, feelings of disconnection. These pressures can drain energy reserves, limiting leaders' capacity to maintain agency and resilience. Traditional approaches to leadership — focused on performance, strategy and behaviour — are vital but no longer sufficient. Today, leaders benefit from integrating holistic practices that honour the full human experience, extending beyond cognitive refinement to embrace mind, body and spirit.

The need to work with and transform energy

'Energy cannot be created or destroyed, it can only be changed from one form to another.' **Albert Einstein**

I propose that effective leadership extends beyond rational thought to engage with deeper, more subtle layers of the self, and this article explores the intersection of spirituality, somatic practices and conscious leadership. Drawing on insights from neuroscience and quantum physics, I suggest that by moving into these less conscious layers, leaders can cultivate profound emotional and physical resilience. Recognising that sustainable leadership arises from an internal state, embodied learning and *the critical transformation of energy* serve as gateways to more profound self-awareness.

Thought leaders such as scientist Joe Dispenza inspire curiosity around the potential of quantum physics, which reveals that at the subatomic level, reality exists in a state of infinite possibilities. Dispenza posits that thoughts and emotions can influence physical reality. By aligning with the 'quantum field' — where all potentials exist simultaneously until influenced by consciousness — he suggests that leaders can connect intention (through thought) and energy (through emotion) to shape outcomes.¹

According to Dispenza, the mind's focus and emotional energy can tangibly impact the physical world. Through clear intention and emotional release, thoughts can create new realities, healing and even the attraction of different experiences. His metaphysical interpretation of quantum physics centres on personal transformation, proposing that by altering thoughts and aligning emotions, individuals can create a desired future and manifest meaningful change.

Coaching to recalibrate the human system

When guiding those who operate at high-impact leadership levels, coaching can play a pivotal role in recalibrating the entire human system. Encouraging leaders to integrate spirituality with somatic practices creates pathways for addressing emotional and physical blockages, realigning with core purpose, and developing greater resilience.

Coaches are encouraged to create safe spaces for this deep work, especially when corporate settings lack room for contemplation and inner exploration. Within the coaching space, leaders can release conditioned responses, connect with inner wisdom, and emerge with renewed presence. These embodied practices help leaders access the essential but often unseen dimensions necessary to navigate the complexities of modern leadership.

Spirituality and leadership: beyond organised religion

I speak about spirituality as distinct from organised religion, and the two should not be confused. Unlike organised religion, which often follows more structured doctrines, spirituality is an inward, personal journey facilitating connection with yourself and the universe. This connection nurtures clarity, resilience and purpose, especially within the complexities leaders face today.

Influencers like Joe Dispenza¹ and Gregg Braden² explore spirituality through the lenses of quantum physics and neuroscience, revealing how higher consciousness and heart-brain coherence can transform leaders' thinking and decision making. Dispenza's work suggests that aligning with the quantum field can help leaders break free from limited thought patterns, while Braden's research into heart-brain coherence highlights the power of intuitive, emotionally intelligent behaviour.²

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Conscious leadership emerges when leaders integrate spiritual and somatic practices within their journey

Indian spiritual thinkers like Jiddu Krishnamurti³ and Osho⁴ emphasise spirituality as a personal journey beyond structured religion. Krishnamurti's famous phrase, *'Truth is a pathless land'*, encourages leaders to seek truths free from external expectations.³ Osho's insight, *'Religion is the product of fear, spirituality is the product of courage'*, points to a leadership style grounded in authenticity and courage.⁴

When leaders see themselves as part of something greater, they have a compass for navigating life's complexities. Studies show that a connection to higher meaning profoundly impacts wellbeing, health and a sense of agency.⁵ This connection strengthens leaders' capacity to face challenges with confidence, clarity and compassion, creating an environment of meaningful purpose and collective growth.

Physiology and leadership: the body-mind connection

Before delving into spiritual and somatic practices, it's essential to recognise the profound connection between body, mind and spirit. Neuroscience reveals that the body stores emotional experiences, particularly within the autonomic nervous system, which controls 'fight-freeze-fawn-flight' responses. Chronic stress depletes energy reserves, manifesting in physical symptoms like digestive issues, headaches and muscle tension — all of which hinder decision making and emotional regulation.

The parasympathetic nervous system, known for aiding processes of 'resting and digesting', helps counteract stress. Without balance from this system, the sympathetic 'fight-or-flight' response can lead to chronic stress responses, draining physical and mental resources. Practices like breathwork and mindfulness activate relaxation, reduce cortisol and improve heart rate variability, supporting both physical health and cognitive function.^{6,7}

Studies consistently reveal that leaders who integrate somatic, mind-body, and spiritual practices to regulate the autonomic nervous system experience transformative improvements in mental and physical health.⁸ These leaders report fewer stress-related ailments, improved sleep quality and heightened mental clarity, allowing them to approach leadership with resilience and calm. The body of research on body-centred and energy-based practices in stress and health management is growing rapidly, bringing forth compelling and unprecedented evidence of the profound impacts these modalities have on leadership effectiveness and wellbeing.⁹ This paradigm shift highlights how holistic approaches are becoming essential tools for sustainable, conscious leadership.

The transformative role of breathwork in integrating mind, body and spirit

Breathwork, particularly through facilitated practices like breathflow integrative practice, acts as a profound connector between mind, body, and soul, enabling leaders to access deeper layers of resilience, insight and purpose.¹⁰ Breathflow is a gentle, safe process that facilitates healing without requiring individuals to relive past trauma. Instead, it offers a secure and supportive space where emotions can be released and energy realigned, bringing deep restorative healing.

This method goes beyond classic breath control exercises, engaging the nervous system in ways that facilitate relaxation, emotional release and heightened awareness. Through rhythmic, purposeful breathing, practitioners navigate diverse states of consciousness, resting the pre-frontal cortex (or judging mind), allowing for the release of stored emotions, resetting of their energetic field and alignment with their deeper self.

One significant benefit of breathflow integrative practice is its impact on the physical body, where many leaders experience chronic stress-induced symptoms such as neck and shoulder tension, headaches, migraines, digestive issues, and even respiratory conditions like asthma. Through the activation of the parasympathetic nervous system — known as the body's 'rest and digest' mode — breathflow helps counteract the effects of chronic stress by reducing cortisol levels and improving heart rate variability. This physical relaxation leads to improved blood circulation, reduced muscle tension, and alleviated symptoms related to stress, such as migraines and muscular pain.

For example, individuals with chronic tension or migraines often find relief as they release the underlying emotional layers connected to these symptoms. Asthma sufferers, who frequently experience stress-induced breathing constraints, can also benefit from facilitated breathflow integrative practices that expand respiratory capacity and ease tension in the chest and diaphragm. By opening up breath pathways, breathwork not only alleviates physical symptoms but also brings emotional regulation, providing a buffer that supports leaders in maintaining composure and clarity under pressure.

Breathflow integrative breathing bridges the spiritual dimension by stimulating an expansive awareness that connects those practising the technique to their intuition and higher forms of purpose. Through deep, cyclical breathing, leaders tap into their subconscious mind, where deeply held beliefs and conditioned responses, rooted in traumatic memories, reside. In these moments of expanded consciousness, practitioners can dissolve mental barriers and release old narratives, empowering them to lead with authenticity and alignment. This level of inner work enables leaders to align their intentions with their actions, manifesting outcomes that resonate with their values and aspirations.

Helen, a senior executive in a multinational company, often struggled with neck and shoulder pain. This pain affected not only her focus but also her interactions, making her 'snappy' and less tolerant with her team. Through coaching, Helen uncovered that her tension was tied to deeply held emotions like anger, shame and grief. These emotions, stored in her body, were manifesting as pain. By embracing breathwork, Helen transitioned from pain management to emotional release. Over time, her physical symptoms eased, and her approach to stress softened. This shift transformed her leadership style, making her more grounded and empathetic. Helen's ability to navigate tension and conflict improved, creating a more constructive team dynamic.

James, a senior manager with asthma, often felt physically and emotionally constrained under stress. Asthma episodes compounded his feelings of helplessness, which impacted his leadership confidence. Through breathwork in his coaching sessions, James found a new relationship with his breath, enabling him to manage his physical symptoms and be less reactive. Gradually, James shifted from needing control over his condition to embracing freedom in his breath, finding calm in high-pressure situations and generating an ability to respond rather than react.

Attuning inner and outer worlds

Conscious leadership emerges when leaders integrate spiritual and somatic practices within their journey. These practices promote self-awareness and emotional intelligence, recognising that a leader's inner state directly influences their external actions. Leaders aligned with their true purpose become adaptable, resilient and capable of navigating complex challenges.

Healing modalities enable leaders to build authentic connections, develop environments with psychological safety and enhance the quality of dialogue. As trauma-informed leadership advisor Thomas Hübl states, attunement is 'the ability to listen deeply — not just with the mind but with the whole being.'¹¹ Leaders attuned to their emotional landscapes and inner resilience inspire collaboration and innovation within their teams, ultimately creating a supportive environment that nurtures team growth and wellbeing.

Anna, a director at a financial services firm, struggled with control, often rooted in emotions like shame and a need for perfection. Her tendency to micromanage created anxiety within her team. In her coaching journey, Anna used breathwork to explore and release these emotional attachments. She set an intention to trust herself and others more fully. As she embraced ambiguity and let go of perfectionism, Anna's ability to delegate and lead with trust flourished, enhancing her team's resilience and adaptability.

From strain to sustained influence: a CEO's journey to empowered leadership through breathwork and spiritual alignment

Background: Samantha, CEO of a technology company, faced ongoing stress and physical health challenges, including migraines and digestive discomfort. These issues, compounded by feelings of disconnection from her team, led Samantha to work with a coach specialising in somatic practices and breathwork.

The coaching process: Samantha's journey began by addressing her physiological and emotional pain points. Breathwork helped her regulate her nervous system, easing her digestive and migraine issues, while spiritual practices reconnected personal choice.

Transformation and outcomes: After six months, Samantha experienced significant changes. Her migraines lessened, energy levels improved and her decision making became more intuitive. She introduced five-minute breathwork moments in team meetings, bringing calm and connection. This practice positively impacted her team's engagement and cultivated a more open, collaborative culture.

Case analysis:

- **Physiological benefits:** Regular breathwork improved Samantha's physical health, alleviating digestive and migraine symptoms. This allowed her to reduce medication dependence, illustrating how managing energy through somatic practices can create tangible health improvements
- **Resilience and alignment:** Breathwork helped Samantha align her energy, emotions and values, leading to enhanced composure and purpose. Her leadership presence grew more grounded, making her a more effective and authentic leader
- **Collective healing:** Samantha's transformation influenced the level of psychological safety in her team which enhanced inclusiveness and creativity.

Next steps for leaders

1. **Intentional leadership:** Set purpose-driven intentions that resonate with your core values. These intentions serve as a compass, guiding authentic actions and empowering leaders to operate from a place of alignment
2. **Daily breathwork practice:** Incorporate breathwork to release emotional blockages and reduce stress. Just a few minutes each morning can centre the mind, reduce tension and lighten emotional load
3. **Integrate movement:** Conscious movement, like yoga or stretching, can release physical tension, enhance mental clarity and increase body awareness, enabling leaders to face challenges with embodied calm.

Practical first steps for coaches

Coaches are encouraged to explore spiritual and somatic practices, helping leaders access a range of tools for personal growth and emotional regulation:

Breathwork exercises: Coaches can introduce clients to simple techniques that regulate the nervous system, enhance focus and support self-awareness, such as:

- **Integrative breathflow:** For a profound connection to our higher self and universal alignment, integrative breathflow invites clients into heightened states of consciousness, unlocking insights for personal growth. Coaches require specialised training, extensive practice and certification to guide clients through these transformative practices
- **Visualisation techniques:** Visualising moments of empowerment helps leaders reconnect with positive energies from past experiences, generating a renewed sense of purpose
- **Mindfulness practices:** Simple practices like body scans or mindful listening develop self-awareness and encourage leaders to respond thoughtfully.

Practical steps for coaches integrating breathwork and somatic practices

Guided breathwork routines: Introduce clients to simple breathwork practices.

- **Diaphragmatic breathing:** Encourage slow, deep belly breathing for 5-10 minutes to activate the parasympathetic nervous system and promote calm
- **Box breathing:** Use the 4-4-4-4 count technique to help clients ground themselves, ideal before high-stress moments
- **Alternate nostril breathing:** Suggest this as a practice to balancing both hemispheres of the brain and bring clarity.

Challenges and considerations

While integrating spiritual and somatic practices into leadership coaching offers profound benefits, certain challenges may arise:

1. **Client resistance:** Some leaders may initially resist spiritual or somatic practices, especially if they are accustomed to more familiar approaches. Coaches are encouraged to introduce these techniques gradually, emphasising scientific insights into the mind-body connection
2. **Ethical considerations:** Somatic work should always be approached with care, ensuring clients have full agency and choice to explore without feeling pressured. Coaches are also encouraged to engage in breathwork practices themselves, maintain active supervision, and obtain full certification
3. **Blending fields:** Coaches should maintain ongoing education in these areas to ensure they integrate spiritual and somatic practices responsibly, staying up to date with advancements in the field.

Leading with heart, purpose and presence

Coaches create a safe space where leaders can pause, contemplate, and connect with the quantum field of potential within and around them. Through transformative practices like breathwork, visualisation and mindfulness, coaches help leaders to harmonise their inner world with the bigger picture, balancing self-reflection with expansive awareness and transmute energy. This journey opens doors to deep inner alignment, clarity and balance, equipping leaders to navigate complexity with grounded presence and renewed purpose. In this sacred space, leaders are empowered to integrate mind, body and spirit — unlocking a leadership presence that resonates far beyond their individual impact, inspiring a ripple of conscious, purpose-led change. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Samreen McGregor is an executive coach for senior leaders and teams, the

founder of Turmeric, and the creator of Breathe with Samreen, a practice offering healing through breathwork and other somatic modalities. With over 25 years of experience, she works with clients at the intersection of business performance, behavioural change and embodied consciousness. Author of the award-winning *Leader Awakened* (Rethink Press, 2022), Samreen helps leaders regulate their nervous systems and unlock resilience and authentic leadership.

<https://turmericgroup.com>
www.breathewithsamreen.com

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