

# The Little-known Secrets of BREATHING

From the moment we're born until we literally take our last breath, breathing is so basic to our survival that we rarely pay any attention to it. But proper breathing can actually be a powerful healing tool for a fuller, healthier and happier life – so are you doing it right?

Writer Danielle Parla

I've been having an affair for the past few years that is exciting and takes me to depths within myself that I never thought possible. I could survive days without food and water, but I would die within minutes without it. You see, I am having the most deliciously intimate relationship with my own breath. Literally right under my nose, I recognise that proper breathing is elusive and challenging and the most powerful

healing mechanism available to me.

The automatic action of breathing occurs without us even thinking about it and yet, if you take a few minutes to focus on your breath, you will most likely see that it is challenged in some way. You are not alone. It is believed that the average person uses 20 to 30 per cent of their lung capacity and exercises two problematic breathing patterns: upper chest breathing and breath holding.

Breath traditions and techniques with a varied emphasis on the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual benefits have evolved from many world cultures. Both gross and subtle in action and effect, it is no small wonder that there are so many techniques and practices that aim to open the gateway to effective breathing.

On a purely physical level, our breath delivers oxygen (O<sup>2</sup>) to the cells of the brain and body for cellular respiration

IMAGE SOURCE/CORBIS





with inhalation and releases carbon dioxide (CO<sup>2</sup>) through exhalation. The breathing process supports the fires of life: metabolism, detoxification, purification of the glands and organs and calming of the nervous system. However, if you are not breathing properly or to your full capacity the levels of both oxygen and carbon dioxide get out of balance and compromise normal physiological functioning. With stress and stress-related conditions often cited as the leading reason for doctors' visits, we could all benefit from learning to breathe better.

One breathing technique that aims to optimise mental and physical health is the Buteyko Method, which was developed in the Soviet Union more than 50 years ago by Dr Konstantin Pavlovich Buteyko, an elite scientist and doctor, who specialised in breath mechanics and advanced diagnostics. Dr Buteyko intensively investigated the physiology and biochemical differences between people in good health and those with chronic health conditions like asthma and cancer, and he discovered that those with a high respiratory tidal volume (5+

litres/minute) had lower levels of disease resistance and more chronic disease.

Although exhaled CO<sup>2</sup> is considered a respiratory waste product, he discovered that a certain level of CO<sup>2</sup> is required in the body for a number of other essential functions, including optimal oxygen utilisation and pH and hormonal balance. He also discovered that the effects of stress, pain, emotions and illness contribute to an increased heart rate and over-breathing (low-level hyperventilation), which decrease the levels of CO<sup>2</sup> to below optimal levels. This action causes CO<sup>2</sup>-induced vasoconstriction and lowers the blood and oxygen supply to vital organs. In time, "the body becomes conditioned to the lower levels of CO<sup>2</sup> and the respiratory mechanism drives us to breathe more than we need to, thus keeping the levels low," says Buteyko instructor Jac Vidgen, who has been working with the Buteyko Method since 1993. He explains that the key is to regulate the breath so that overbreathing is eliminated. Buteyko Breathing redefines the belief that 'more is better' and courses teach people to become fully aware of their

over-breathing and learn optimal breathing techniques, so they are fully vital and clear in their body and mind.

Ask any meditator and they will say the breath is the most powerful tool we have to bring us mental clarity and in touch with the present moment. Just close your eyes and breathe slowly through your nose, watch your deep inhalation enter and fill your lungs, so that your belly rounds and exhale slowly and completely. Do this three times with your attention concentrated on this action and you will quickly discover how the mind's chatter stops, your shoulders relax and you find yourself in the NOW.

*"Whilst we practice conscious breathing, our thinking will slow down, and we can give ourselves a real rest. Most of the time, we think too much, and mindful breathing helps us to be calm, relaxed and peaceful. It helps us to stop thinking so much and stop being possessed by sorrows of the past and worries of the future. It enables us to be in touch with life, which is wonderful in the present moment"*

~ Thich Nhat Hanh, Peace Is Every Step



THIS PAGE: Daniela Rusconi offers verbal support and applies pressure to strategic areas of the body map to facilitate correct breathing. OPPOSITE PAGE: A person experiencing prolonged stress will breathe in a superficial and irregular manner



JUSTIN PAGE/CORBIS

Our breath is the primary modulator and stabiliser between the stress we experience (whether actual or perceived) and the nervous system's response. The effect of the breath on the nervous system influences the way a person thinks, feels and speaks and vice versa. Thus a person experiencing prolonged stress will breathe in a superficial and irregular manner and have more erratic thoughts and emotions than an effective breather.

Expanding on Holotropic Breathwork and Rebirthing work of Leonard Orr, Dr Judith Kravitz incorporated principles from various practices, such as Kundalini Yoga, Body Mapping and Sound Healing, and developed a method called Transformational Breath. TB practitioners believe that we learn through socialisation and conditioning as we grow, that it isn't safe to be the spontaneous and free being that we were born to be. If we watch the spontaneous expressions of children, we witness how these actions are met with clear messages

**"A Deep, relaxed breath will amplify the electromagnetic energy of your brain and your heart"**

~ Jonathan Goldman

and that they are not appropriate (eg nice girls don't get angry, big boys don't cry). As social beings we learn to adapt our behaviour to ensure that we fit in, and so in order to not feel the emotions as they arise in the moment, we start to control our breath. Over time, we lose the capacity to breathe, by literally storing the traumas and suppressions within the physical and energetic body.

Swiss-based Transformational Breath practitioner, Daniela Rusconi works with people who wish to free their breath,

including yoga practitioners. With a focus on the inhalation into the belly, the breather lies down and breathes a connected breath through the mouth (no pause between inhalation and exhalation) for about 40 minutes. The TB practitioner offers verbal support, applies pressure to strategic areas of the body map to facilitate opening and releasing and holds the space. Transformational breathing is a breath technology that allows us to bypass our conscious reasoning and intellect and deal with unaddressed emotions, stresses, memories and negative belief systems. TB is not to be employed as a normal daily breath, but rather an effective time-limited method to go to the core of your breath, connect to your heart, fill your being with creative energy and life force, and feel deep inner peace.

There is a deep sense of wonder and awe when we approach the spirit within our breath, for it is so remarkably powerful that it can connect or separate us from the core



“The breath is a barometer for life’s energy and a fundamental tool to clearly see our emotional world”

~ Hargobind Singh



of our being or higher self. Sound healer and composer, Jonathan Goldman shares that a “deep, relaxed breath will amplify the electromagnetic energy of your brain and your heart.”

*“But breath as ‘pneuma’ is also the spirit or soul. We live in an ocean of air, like fish in a body of water. By our breathing we are attuned to our atmosphere. If we inhibit our breathing, we isolate ourselves from the medium in which we exist. In all Oriental and mystic philosophies, the breath holds the secret to the highest bliss. That is why breathing is the dominant factor in the practice of yoga”*

~ Alexander Lowen, *The Voice of the Body*

Master Kundalini teacher, Hargobind Singh has been dedicated to the teachings and practice of Kundalini Yoga for over 42 years. He describes the breath as a “barometer for life’s energy and a fundamental tool to clearly see our emotional world, open ourselves up to our creative potential, deal with changes in our energy levels, strengthen our health and develop concentration.” By becoming intimate with the basic nature of our breath and learning to breathe deeper,

we are able to move beyond restrictive breathing and strengthen our nervous system. Singh believes that our breath has the ability to touch the hidden mystery of life and encourages us to breathe deeper in order to look deeper and experience the full landscape of our emotions, thoughts, spirit and actions. In yoga, the breath is seen as both a “physical action and also representing the subtle life force that is alive in the body and mind called prana.” While there are many specific pranayama or breath practices in yoga, the fundamental yogic breath involves three separate phases (abdominal, thoracic/chest and clavicular), and by learning to consciously breathe into each part, you will open new spaces in your body, mind and spirit.

To start your exploration, I highly recommend Dennis Lewis’ book *Free Your Breath, Free Your Life* for useful insights about breathing as a personal journey to balance, rather than a prescription for specific problems. Lewis believes that the expertise of knowledgeable teachers and hands-on bodywork or breath therapy can be beneficial, but unless we can find a “deep sustained interest in self-exploration, an exploration that includes the breath and its

relationship to living and consciousness, we will not get very far, no matter how much expert help we get.”

Lewis suggests it is necessary to respect the transformative power of the breath and determine whether “the particular exercises we are doing are appropriate for our physical, emotional and mental situation or condition at that particular time”. For its profound ability to cultivate inner stillness and a solid foundation for all other kinds of breathwork, most traditions begin with awareness of the ‘conscious breath’. In addition, effective breathing utilises nasal breathing, which allows for regulation of airflow and temperature, filtration and humidification.

*“All healing originally resides in the human breathing system” ~ Rudolf Steiner*

Humans have long sought happiness and feelings of wholeness from outside of themselves, yet our own breath is a beautiful bridge between body, mind and spirit and gives us an opportunity to live with fuller health, harmony and vitality. By developing intimacy with it, you open the possibility of receiving the full wisdom and consciousness of your own breath and changing your physical, emotional and mental chemistry in ways you hadn’t imagined possible. 🌿

IMAGE SOURCE/CORBIS: PRANAYAMA, NADHI SOOHANA, KERALA, INDIA/IMMAGINE



THIS PAGE: Basic pranayama practices involve nasal breathing, which allows for regulation of airflow and temperature, filtration and humidification. OPPOSITE PAGE: Breathing deeper lets us experience the full landscape of our emotions

#### BREATH OF LIFE:

Buteyko Method  
Jac Vidgen  
[www.learnbuteyko.info](http://www.learnbuteyko.info)

Transformational Breath  
Dr Judith Kravitz  
[www.transformationalbreathing.com](http://www.transformationalbreathing.com)

Daniela Rusconi  
[www.atemtraining.ch](http://www.atemtraining.ch)

Self-exploration  
Dennis Lewis  
[www.dennislewis.org](http://www.dennislewis.org)

Kundalini Yoga  
Hargobind Singh  
[www.imagineacademy.eu](http://www.imagineacademy.eu)