



The Importance of Breathing Less Earnestly

By Peter Myers

Breathing affects everything we do. Peter Myers finds the drug-less Buteyko method retrained his breathing - drastically - and his asthma was all but cured after a short five-session course.

Around 2,400 years ago, the Chinese sage Lao Tzu stated: "The perfect man breathes as if he is not breathing." Yet today, most of us still haven't worked out the best way to breathe, and for something that we do 20,000 to 30,000 times a day, making an adjustment to our breathing patterns can make a profound change to our mental and physical health.

Let's Hear it for CO2

Quiz most people about oxygen and CO2 and they will call the former the 'breath of life' and the latter a poison or waste gas that we must eject from our body quick-smart. Actually, CO2 serves to liberate oxygen from the sticky red blood cells

into organs and tissues, so plays a central role in oxygenation. Also, although we believe that the involuntary breaths we take throughout our lives are urged by an immediate requirement for oxygen, they are actually triggered by the brain's respiratory centre depending on the body's carbon dioxide levels.

We also believe - mistakenly - that the deeper we breathe, the more oxygen our body obtains. In fact, in an apparent contradiction, the deeper our breaths, the less oxygen is available for our body - and the delicate balance between CO2 and oxygen is disturbed. Of course, naturally, depth of breathing increases with physical exercise.

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When we over-breathe, we exhale too much CO2 (faster than it can work on releasing haemoglobin from the red blood cells and oxygenate the body), which leads to spasms of our bronchial smooth muscles, brain vessels and organs. Along with lung hyperventilation, the lack of oxygen in the brain creates a false feeling of a lack of air, accompanied by more intensified breathing and dizziness (attempt a swift series of deep breaths and see how dizzy you quickly become).

Breathing: Less is More

But why do we over-breathe? Senior Breathing Practitioner, Buteyko Breathing Asia, Jac Vidgen explains that it was only in the recent stage of our 'walking upright' evolution that human breathing became a problem (no other animal

*Previous page: Just say no to inhalers! [Photo by Fee Lee]
Above: Buteyko practitioner Jac Vidgen teaches his students how to control their breathing. [Picture courtesy of Jac Vidgen/Buteyko Breathing Asia]*

experiences breathing problems like we routinely do). "Back in times when man lived a constant 'fight or flight' existence, the heart rate and breathing increases that governed our stress mechanisms were dramatic but fitting. But in modern times, when we spend all day sitting behind a desk in bouts of intense mental activity, and then go for a workout for 'relaxation' or to 'de-stress,' we are reversing this, and confounding our bodies' age-old respiratory apparatus."

In the early 1950's, the eminent Russian physician Dr. Konstantin Buteyko was assigned to a project which included assessing the breathing patterns of dying patients in a hospital. He quickly realised that these patients were breathing a lot deeper than healthy people, and went on to investigate the optimum level that healthy person should



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be breathing. Subsequent tests found that many people - especially asthmatics and those suffering from stress, but also apparently healthy people - routinely over-breathed.

In a medical establishment set toward innovative new drugs, Dr. Buteyko's drug-less breathing-normalisation work met with resistance by medical authorities (it's now an integrated treatment in the Russian health system). The majority of the world's doctors prefer, or are even legally obliged, to prescribe expensive symptom-improving asthma inhalers, for example, to the delight of the pharmaceutical giants, despite no asthma medication ever achieving better long-term results than Buteyko. 90 percent of asthmatics claim a reduction in their symptoms after the Buteyko course, which treats cause not symptoms, and I was to become one of the thousands of sufferers around the world who have greeted the method as a miracle cure.

Asthmatics (like dying people) breathe too much, so as a defence mechanism, the body signals bronchial muscles to spasm, constricting airflow to the lungs to stop this over-breathing. Asthma inhalers, Prof. Buteyko realised, increase the rate of CO₂ removal, thus worsening the state of already-ill patients while giving them temporary relief. No asthma society has yet endorsed the Buteyko method; not surprising, considering that most are sponsored by drug firms.

Left: Jac Vidgen, Senior Practitioner, Buteyko Breathing Asia. [Picture courtesy of Jac Vidgen]

Do You Over-Breathe?

Do a 'control pause,' i.e. relax, sit upright and breathe in gently for two seconds. Exhale fully, start your stopwatch and hold your breath until the moment that it becomes difficult. If this took less than 10 seconds, you have serious health problems probably caused by over-breathing. Under 25 seconds, and you health still needs attention. Around 30 seconds, you are likely to be mildly asthmatic. 50 seconds or more: you're in good health, well done!

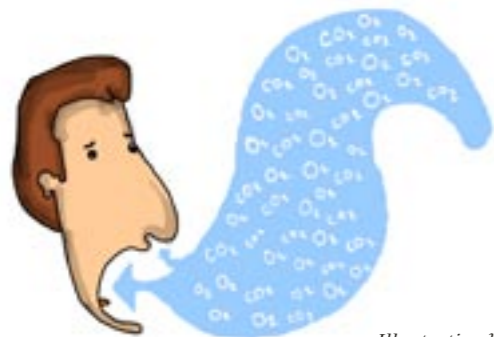


Illustration by I + t

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The Buteyko method reverses a wide range of the chronic 'diseases of civilisation,' i.e. allergies, hormonal disorders, insomnia, psoriasis, sleep apnoea, sinusitis and high blood pressure. Don't be mistaken, Buteyko isn't some wonder-method panacea for all known ills, but it does set straight some of the modern world's most common diseases which cause some of the most suffering. In the US, for example, drug sales have increased by 85 percent in the last five years, but common health conditions are getting worse.

Buteyko: A Miracle Cure?

So far, so scientific; it was time that this arch cynic of alternative therapies put his disease to the test. Having always assumed my asthma was hereditary, or at least caused by environmental factors when I was in my infancy and then provoked by stress, exercise, dust allergies, cats and cold weather later on, it came as rather a shock to be informed by Jac Vidgen that my asthma was just one consequence of my dysfunctional breathing pattern. A chronic asthmatic from the age of four to my mid-teens; by my late twenties I still could not go anywhere without my 'broncodilator' inhaler and I have depended on a twice-daily steroid to prevent attacks for as long as I can remember.

After a few days practising Buteyko, I had stopped using my bronchodilator, reduced the steroid, and also noticed that I was never becoming wheezy. Now, over three months on, I have still not taken one single puff. After being resigned to a life sentence with my debility, my asthma has ceased to be an issue; I can play squash, go the gym or swim without taking a precautionary puff or incurring symptoms after exercise. However, Jac does advise asthmatics to carry around their inhalers for at least a year after the course.

The most noticeable changes from Buteyko practice, according Jac, occur in children: "Children haven't yet learnt how not to breathe, and they can retrain their breathing much more easily than adults, as they haven't got decades of malpractice to overhaul." Jac is one of only several Westerners who have been issued diplomas from Buteyko's Academy in Moscow. He currently travels between Bangkok, Hong Kong and Manila teaching very reasonably-priced five-day workshops or one-on-one sessions. Any follow-up after the course is given for free - and a full refund is processed if symptoms do not improve.



During the classes, certain breathing exercises are practised and the student must keep a thrice-daily log of their pulse rates and duration of their 'controlled' and 'extended' pauses between five-minute bouts of very shallow breathing (reducing the amount of air that travels up and down the nostrils until one feels a slight lack of air). This should be 'referenced' during restive situations throughout the day; when driving, watching TV, at work, etc. "Have you ever noticed how you breathe in the shower, or when you're talking, or when you're stressed at work?" Jac asked me. I hadn't; but the next time I took a shower, I realised that I gasped like a dying man.

Buteyko simply allows you more input to your health, but once you have modified your lifestyle, the important thing is not to become a slave to the method. The biggest change in my lifestyle is that I now tape my mouth shut when asleep to stop my habitual mouth breathing. I now wake feeling more refreshed and, bizarrely, dream much less. It is important to ask the people who you live with to help you focus on your breathing; my girlfriend helpfully shouts "Mouth!" when she sees my mouth drop open, which means I have reverted to heavy, mouth breathing.

Buteyko has not only helped ill people, but super-fit athletes have also achieved higher endurance, lower heart rates and faster recovery. Some athlete advocates include Caren Clonda (former World Junior Squash Champion), and former All Black's rugby player Con Barrell. It isn't easy, but next time you're in the gym, try not to breathe through your mouth at all. It might reduce your performance at first, but in the long-run, you will notice the difference and be able run as fast as our ancestors did when being chased by a woolly predator. 🌐



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