

THE BUTEYKO METHOD: It's as simple as breathing

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PHOTOS COURTESY OF JAC VIDGEN

Breathing is something we take for granted. After all, we've known how to do it the minute we were born. Our most fundamental exercise—indeed, what we do the most of each day—gets no thought at all. But consider this: What if we've been doing it wrong all along?

The Buteyko Method, named after Dr. Konstantin Pavlovich Buteyko, the Russian physician who developed it, is a technique that believes simply breathing correctly is the key to solving a lot of health issues. In the course of his studies, Dr. Buteyko found out that nine out of 10 people actually breathe too much.

The culprit? Modern day life. In the old days, we'd only breathe deeply if we were doing strenuous activity, or if our bodies were getting ready for “flight or fight”. But now that we live in a world of heightened stress, our bodies are always in “flight or fight” mode. Ironically, we are often most stressed when our bodies are doing nothing, e.g. when typing, texting, or using modern technology. But because our body can't differentiate between physical and mental stress, our body gets used to taking in a higher amount of air all the time.

Although breathing more deeply when our body needs it is OK (e.g. aerobic exercise), it is chronic hyperventilation that causes health issues. You might be thinking, what's wrong with taking in more air? That brings more oxygen into our lungs. The paradox may be difficult to accept, but here it is: Breathing less actually allows your body to absorb more oxygen.

If this seems counterintuitive, blame it all on the handy-dandy chemical known as carbon dioxide.

In school, we were taught that too much CO₂ is dangerous for our health. What we often forget is that the body actually needs carbon dioxide for oxygenation, plus many other regulatory roles. And because carbon dioxide levels in the air we breathe is very low (around 0.035% as compared to 78% of nitrogen and 21% of oxygen), overbreathing can dilute CO₂ in our

bodies and make it difficult for cells and tissue to absorb oxygen from our bloodstream.

Dr. Buteyko's studies found that patients suffering from asthma, sleep apnea, allergies, anxiety, and some 200 other conditions all shared a common feature: they all ventilated above the recommended norm of 3-4 liters per minute at rest. However, when he checked those who breathed within the recommended norms, he discovered that they demonstrated remarkable strength, stamina, and mental stability.

As Lao Tzu once said, “The perfect man breathes as though he is not breathing.” Suddenly we realize that all that advice we heard over the years to take deep breaths is totally misleading. It is actually shallow breathing that will improve our health.

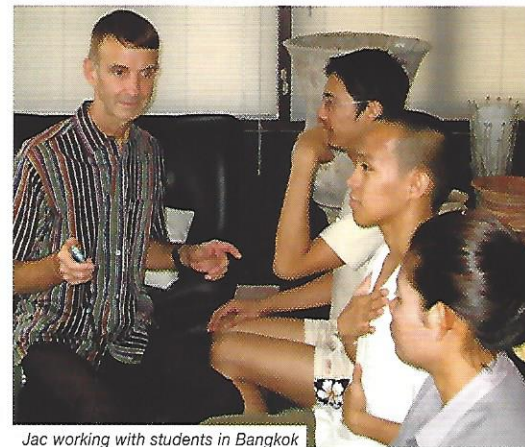
For those who may think that the Buteyko Method is merely a new-fangled, new age concept, clinical trials have actually proven that it is consistently effective against asthma, removing or lessening patients' dependence on drugs or inhalers.

The method claims that improving breathing can make you sleep better, lose weight, and develop more muscle strength. But while the solution may seem simple, the practice is a lot harder than you would think.

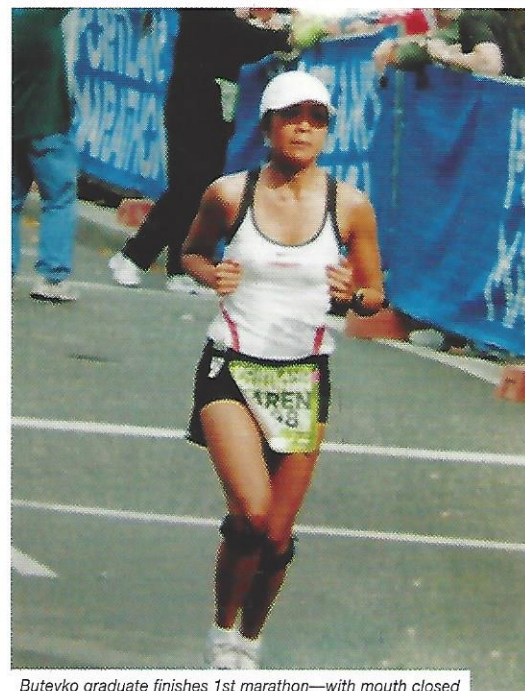
Says Jac Vidgen, a senior Buteyko practitioner who conducts training workshops around the country, “The success rate will depend entirely on the person's need and willingness to practice. You're changing the biggest habit we have, and you can't expect to change that without some work.”

Although Buteyko do-it-yourself tutorials have started to proliferate on the internet, Vidgen cautions against practicing it without the proper training.

In sports and fitness, the Buteyko Method has far-reaching implications. For one, Vidgen cites breathing through the mouth during exercise as



Jac working with students in Bangkok



Buteyko graduate finishes 1st marathon—with mouth closed

potentially dangerous. Nasal breathing is important at all times since the nose is built to humidify, warm, and clean the air before it enters the lungs, and it also reduces the tendency to overbreathe. Second, more and more athletes have started to use the method, claiming that it improves their performance and stamina. ♦

For more information on Buteyko and workshop schedules in the country, visit <http://www.buteykoasia.com> and <http://buteykoasia.multiply.com>.