

THE BIG IDEAS

Breath

The common denominator of life.

Breath Awareness

+ Conscious breathing.

Want to Detox?

Breathing = 70%

Your New Breath

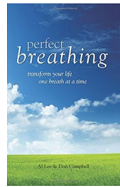
Nice and deep.

The Inverse Relationship

How to flip the emotional switch.

Our First Breath

And our last...



Perfect Breathing

Transform Your Life One Breath at a Time

BY AL LEE & DON CAMPBELL · CREATSPACE INDEPENDENT PUBLISHING PLATFORM
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“What is the *perfect breath*? Far from being some noble yet unreachable goal that takes years of rigorous practice to master, a perfect breath is any breath you take for which you are completely and mindfully aware. In the space of that one simple breath, great things can be accomplished. Perfect breathing is absolutely attainable, and within easy reach. In fact, your very next breath can be a perfect breath.

With this book, we hope to accomplish two things: Raise your awareness level about the power of your breath and the benefits it can bring you, and teach you conscious ways to use that awareness. Step by step, section by section, we will show you how to harness that power, to be mindful of each breath, to use that here-and-now presence to great advantage.”

~ Al Lee & Don Campbell from *Perfect Breathing*

Al Lee and Don Campbell are breathwork practitioners, researchers and lecturers.

I read this book as part of my preparation for Optimal Breathing 101. It's a nice complement to Patrick McKeown's [The Oxygen Advantage](#) and [Anxiety Free](#), plus Belisa Vranich's [Breathe](#). (Check out those Notes and the [Breathing Pack](#) for more.)

The underlying theme of the book is the fact that our breath is THE primary connection between our mental, physical, emotional and spiritual well-being. By becoming more aware of our breath and using that awareness consciously, we can do a ton to optimize every facet of our lives and, as the sub-title suggests, “Transform Your Life One Breath at a Time.” (Get a copy [here](#).)

As always, the book is packed with Big Ideas. I'm excited to share a few of my favorites so let's jump straight in!

THE COMMON DENOMINATOR OF LIFE

“What is it that enables a mountain climber to reach the highest points on earth, allows a fighter pilot to stay conscious through the pull of a jet's turn eight times greater than gravity? What guides the archer's arrow to the mark, or enables a ballet dancer to appear to be lighter than air? What carries a seeker to the innermost realms of spirit, and has been recognized for centuries as one of the most potent healing agents available to mankind?

The breath.

For something so simple, automatic, and for most people, unconscious, breathing carries with it great power. It is the single most dynamic energy conversion in the human body and fuels every one of your cells. Every neuron, every synapse, every muscle feeds on the flame of your breath. Breathing is not only critical to sustaining life, but done correctly and consciously, it can be a valuable tool for getting the most out of every human endeavor, from the most demanding physical challenges to the pursuit of understanding life's deepest spiritual mysteries.”

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"For breath is life, and if you breathe well you will live long on earth."
~ Sanskrit Proverb

The breath.

It's kinda important. (Hah.)

Yet, as I've said in our other Notes on breathing, we rarely think about it.

The first step to bringing more awareness to our breath is to realize JUST how *astonishingly* powerful it is. Again, remember that we can live for weeks without food. Days without water. And, mere minutes without breath.

As Belisa Vranich puts it in *Breathe*: "Your body's main source of energy is oxygen. Period."

And: "Oxygen is sustenance in a way that food can never be. Yes, you should eat leafy greens, organic and local, and take your vitamins . . . but the best way to take care of yourself is to deal with the most important thing first: your breathing. Everything else is secondary."

[*The Healing Power of the Breath*](#) authors echo the fact that breath unites all peak performances. They tell us: "What do Mahatma Gandhi, the martial artist Bruce Lee, Buddhist meditators, Christian Monks, Hawaiian kahunas, and Russian Special Forces have in common? They all used breathing to enhance their physical, mental, and spiritual well-being."

OK.

Got it. Breath is important.

Now what?

It's time for breath awareness and conscious breathing...

BREATH AWARENESS + CONSCIOUS BREATHING

"Nearly every physical problem is accompanied by a disturbance of breathing. But which comes first?"
~ Hans Weller, M.D.

"To clear up any confusion that might arise, we'd like to take the opportunity to define several of the terms we'll be using throughout the following chapters. There are essentially two concepts that we will be referring to: breath awareness and conscious breathing. Breath awareness means exactly what it says—being aware of or observing the qualities of your breath, whether it is shallow or deep, long or short, easy or labored, smooth or uneven. Conscious breathing, often referred to as controlled breathing, intentional breathing, and mindful breathing, refers to breathing with purpose. Though there may be subtle differences in the meanings of these terms, they all imply breathing to achieve a result of some kind."

Breath awareness and conscious breathing.

Helping us Optimize both of those so we can Optimize our mental, physical, emotional and spiritual well-being is what the book is all about.

Quick recap.

Breath awareness. How's your breathing right now? Is it shallow or deep? Long or short? Easy or labored? Smooth or uneven?

Well... What do you notice?

That's step 1 to your perfect breath. You can't Optimize what you aren't aware of.

The thing I notice the most when I remember to do this is how often I HOLD my breath—whether I'm typing here or even just doing the dishes. Yikes. Hah. Not good. "Needs work!"

How about *you*?

Then we have conscious breathing. Call it whatever you want: Mindful breathing, controlled breathing, intentional breathing. The basic idea is simple. When we breathe consciously we breathe with PURPOSE.

"What is necessary to change a person is to change his awareness of himself."

~ Abraham Maslow

Are you breathing with purpose?

I might have just taken a nice, slow, deep breath with a nice, long, smooth exhale. Highly recommend it. :)

How about a nice deep inhale to 1 ... 2 ... 3 ... 4 ... 5 ... 6 ... hold for 1 ... and a nice long deeper exhale 1 ... 2 ... 3 ... 4 ... 5 ... 6 ... 7 ... 8 ...

That's the exact count I do for five breaths every single night right when I hop into bed and right before I usually easily fall asleep.

If that's a little long for you, trim it back to 4 inhale and 6 exhale—keeping the inhale light yet deep into your belly and slightly longer on the exhale. Ah....

P.S. Kelly McGonigal is a big fan of breathing as a quick way to boost your willpower. Here's how she puts it in [The Willpower Instinct](#): *"You won't find many quick fixes in this book, but there is one way to immediately boost willpower: Slow your breathing down to four to six breaths per minute. That's ten to fifteen seconds per breath—slower than you normally breathe, but not difficult with a little bit of practice and patience. Slowing the breath down activates the prefrontal cortex and increases heart rate variability, which helps shift the brain and body from a state of stress to self-control mode. A few minutes of this technique will make you feel calm, in control, and capable of handling cravings or challenges."*

Speaking of heart rate variability and 4 to 6 breaths per minute, *The Healing Power of the Breath* authors agree. They call that "coherent breathing" and say: *"Coherent Breathing is a simple way to increase heart-rate variability and balance the stress-response systems. When scientists tested people at all possible breathing rates, they found that there is an ideal breath rate for each person, somewhere between three and a half and six breaths per minute for adults using equal time for breathing in and breathing out, a sweet spot where HRV is maximized and the electrical rhythms of the heart, lungs, and brain become synchronized. Modern researchers have called this the resonant rate, but this phenomenon has been known for centuries by religious adepts in many cultures. For example, when Zen Buddhist monks enter deep meditation, called zazen, they breathe at six breaths per minute. The Italian cardiologist Luciano Bernardi discovered that traditional chanting of the Latin Hail Mary occurs at six breaths per minute. ..."*

Coherent Breathing is breathing at a rate of five breaths per minute, around the middle of the resonant breathing range. ... Breathing at a rate that is close to one's ideal resonant rate can induce a tenfold improvement in HRV. For people who are over six feet tall, the ideal resonant rate is three to three and half breaths per minute."

P.P.S. On the topic of becoming aware of our breathing, don't get discouraged if you find that your breathing is a little sub-optimal. Growth mindset it and know you can improve while thinking of this gem from Vernon Howard's [The Power of Your Supermind](#): *"Encourage yourself by remembering that any detection of negativity within you is a positive act, not a negative one. Awareness of your weakness and confusion makes you strong because conscious awareness is the bright light that destroys the darkness of negativity. Honest self-observation dissolves pains and pressures that formerly did their dreadful work in the darkness of unawareness. This is so important that I urge you to memorize and reflect upon the following summary: Detection of inner negativity is not a negative act, but a courageously positive act that makes you a new person."*

"A man who is a master of himself can end a sorrow as easily as he can invent a pleasure. I don't want to be at the mercy of my emotions. I want to use them, to enjoy them, and to dominate them."

~ Oscar Wilde

WANT TO DETOX? BREATHE

"The waste that is collected by the blood and delivered to the lungs is expelled with the next inhale, but few people realize that 70 percent of the waste that our bodies generate is removed by the breath. Only 30 percent is removed via sweat and elimination. So taking slower deep breaths

"If I had to limit my advice on healthier living to just one tip, it would be simply to learn how to breathe correctly."

~ Dr. Andrew Weil

not only increases the energy your body is receiving but is also crucial to cleansing your body of the waste and toxins that your metabolism generates."

Well that's a fascinating stat.

Your breath removes 70% of the waste that our bodies generate?! Wow.

Deep breathing detox time, baby! :)

Load up on the energy we receive AND boost up the amount of toxins we cleanse = a winning combination.

How about another deep breath?

Pick your favorite count and give me 5!

(Well that was nice. You do it? Get on it! AMAZING 1-minute reboot!)

YOUR NEW BREATH

"Replace the habit of taking short shallow breaths into the top of the lungs with the practice of taking a full deep breath. Nearly all of the benefits begin with this one simple change.

People often ask why they need to change the way they are breathing. It's true that the body monitors oxygen levels and keeps them within the safe operating limits, and the amazing computer in our brain knows how to regulate our breathing in most every situation. So why change a winning game plan? The reason is that our breathing changes over time, and as we previously mentioned, we generally only use about a third of our lung capacity. Watch the way a baby breathes—it looks like there is a balloon in their stomach that inflates and deflates as they inhale and exhale, while their chest barely moves at all. Contrast this with the way most adults breathe: Their stomachs don't move at all and they tend to take small sips of air into the tops of their lungs, shoulders rising with each breath. Like our posture, which can become stooped and crooked if we don't consciously make an effort to sit and stand straight, our breathing can become shallow and cramped unless we make a conscious effort to counteract the forces that would restrict it."

That's from a section all about "Foundation Breathing."

There are essentially three steps to perfect breathing: 1. Learn how to breathe properly. 2. Notice whether you're breathing properly. 3. Get yourself to do so if you're not.

1 + 2 + 3 and... Enter: Perfect breathing.

So, here's your new breath: Breathe in through your nose. Lightly but deeply. All the way down there into your belly. Repeat. :)

Note: Not a BIG breath per se, but a DEEP breath.

Patrick McKeown makes the point that when some people try to breathe deeply they take a "big" breath by raising their shoulders and expanding their chest. But what we *really* want to do is breathe DEEPLY—straight down into our belly, working out our diaphragm and barely moving our chest.

Here's how he describes the importance of going deep as it relates to stress in *The Oxygen Advantage*: "Abdominal breathing is more efficient simply because of the shape of the lungs. Since they are narrow at the top and wider at the bottom, the amount of blood flow in the lower lobes of the lungs is greater than in the upper lobes. The fast upper-chest breathing of people who chronically hyperventilate does not take advantage of the lower parts of the lungs, limiting the amount of oxygen that can be transferred to the blood and resulting in a greater loss of CO₂. Not only this, but upper-chest breathing activates the fight-or-flight response, which raises stress levels and produces even heavier breathing.

"The truth is that our finest moments are most likely to occur when we are feeling deeply uncomfortable, unhappy, or unfulfilled. For it is only in such moments, propelled by our discomfort, that we are likely to step out of our ruts and start searching for different ways or truer answers."

~ M. Scott Peck

"Breathing in, I calm body and mind, Breathing out, I smile. Dwelling in the present moment, I know this is the only moment."

~ Thich Nhat Hanh

Observe your own breathing when you are stressed, or watch the breathing of anxious relatives, friends, or colleagues—you will see that this type of breathing is generally located in the upper chest and goes at a rate faster than normal. When we are stressed we tend to overbreathe and resort to breathing through the mouth. Stressed breathing is faster than normal, audible, produces visible movements, and often involves sighs. Many people habitually breathe in this manner every minute of every hour of every day, holding them in a perpetual state of fight-or-flight with adrenalin levels high. The work of even the best stress counselors, psychologists, or psychotherapists will be limited unless they first help their patients address their dysfunctional breathing. When oxygen delivery to the brain is reduced, no amount of talking and reasoning is going to correct this deficiency. Stressed and anxious patients can only make the progress they really need when their bad breathing habits are addressed."

So..

One more nice, deep breath. In ... and out ... :)

P.S. Remember: "Always strive to inhale through your nose as it is specifically designed to filter, condition, and moisten your breath before it reaches your lungs."

HOW TO FLIP THE EMOTIONAL SWITCH

"Another interesting aspect of our brains is the interplay between our emotions and thoughts or tasks that require our attention or concentration. Researchers at Duke University discovered that the path that 'attentional' thoughts (i.e., threading a needle) take through the brain is different than the path that emotional responses take, although both streams have a common destination: the prefrontal cortex. This area of the brain is responsible for moderating conflicting thoughts and emotions and determining the correct behavior or course of action. Interestingly the Duke researchers determined that there is an inverse relationship between the attentional and the emotional path. When the emotional path is active and emphasized, the attentional path is deemphasized and dampened, and vice versa. This may possibly explain why people under the spell of surging emotions behave irrationally and oftentimes in ways that are clearly not in their best interest or aligned with their beliefs, ethics, or goals—hence the phrase *crime of passion*."

That's from a chapter looking at the relationship between breath and emotion.

We talked about this inverse relationship between your attentional and emotional systems in [our Note](#) on *Your Brain at Work* where we described it as a "seesaw" and discussed the fact that you can get out of negative emotional loops by simply labeling the emotion.

(Note: Not a deep archeo-psychological dig about WHY you're experiencing the emotion. Just simply labeling the emotion with a word or two. :)

"The important thing is this: To be able at any moment to sacrifice what we are for what we could become."

~ Charles DuBois

Another way to achieve the same result?

Take a deep breath. (Or 10.)

That deep breath is your little "attentional" switch you can flip to cool the limbic system and get your prefrontal cortex back online.

Keep that in mind the next time you find yourself getting a little overly emotional.

Inhale. Exhale. Ahhhh...

OUR FIRST AND LAST BREATH AND EVERY ONE IN BETWEEN

"None of us knows where and how our journey ends, but there is only one thing we can do to prepare ourselves—live. By whatever philosophy, credo, or religion, we must each live our life completely, fully, without fear or regret. To do that we must seek awareness, and that can begin with the awareness of your breath, the foundation of your totality as a human being. By

"There are two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle."

~ Albert Einstein

developing the simple profound practice of mindful breathing, you have a lifeline that ties you to every dimension of your life—to your body, to your emotions, to the thoughts racing through your head, to whatever connection you have to the world around you and to the enormity of the universe. Its power lies in the fact that it ties you ineffably to *this moment*, the only one that you truly own."

The book starts with the fact that the first thing we do when we're born is take a deep breath and the last thing we do before we die is take our last breath.

Between those two breaths? It's time to live.

I'm reminded of the great book *Die Empty* by Todd Henry ([check out those Notes](#)). In addition to his brilliant "[Today's the Day!](#)" exercise, he tells us we need to live with a sense of grounded urgency and reminds us: "You have a finite amount of focus, time, and energy to offer the world, and it can never be reclaimed once it's spent. There's no use in wasting your time lamenting the past, because you cannot change or control it. Rather, I urge you to focus on what's next.

Ultimately, your life will be measured by what you gave, not what you received. Don't hold out on the rest of us—we need you to contribute. Spend your life building a body of work you will be proud of. Engage today with urgency and diligence. Plant seeds every day that will yield a harvest later. Tomorrow is only an unfulfilled wish, so live and work as if today is all you have. If you do, you will be able to lay your head down each night satisfied with your work, and in the end, you will die empty of regret, but full of satisfaction for a life well lived."

Here's to giving life everything we've got, one perfect breath at a time!

B

Brian Johnson,
Chief Philosopher

If you liked this Note,
you'll probably like...

[The Oxygen Advantage](#)

[Breathe](#)

[The Healing Power of the Breath](#)

[The Miracle of Mindfulness](#)

[The Relaxation Response](#)

[The Relaxation Revolution](#)

About the Author of "Perfect Breathing"

AL LEE & DON CAMPBELL



Al's professional experience spans high tech engineering and executive management in sectors as diverse as aerospace, entertainment, security, internet technology and non-profits. He also draws from a deep background in martial arts, music, and regenerative disciplines like yoga, Qi Gong, and meditation.

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Don Campbell, together with co-author Al Lee are breathwork practitioners, researchers, lecturers, and the authors of *Perfect Breathing*, *The Perfect Breathing Workbook*, and the authors/composers/producers of the CD *Guided Breathing for Better Living*. Connect: perfectbreathing.com.

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Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at optimize.me.