



Mouth Breathing

*A Conversation - Knoff Yoga Student
Silvia Von Keyserlingk and Master
Teacher James Bryan*

Question:

Hi James, I hope your world is well, happy and contented! I have a question from a student that came to a class on Monday evening. He asked why do we (yogis) breathe only in through the nose and out through the nose as his cardiologist told him to breathe in through the nose BUT out through the mouth. The cardiologist said that is the best way to breathe for health and vitality. I told him the usual thing about filtering the air as we breathe and the different techniques used to control the breath but I had no explanation for the out breath through the mouth. I said the only time we should open our mouths is to eat or speak. Could you explain maybe why we yogis don't open our mouths to exhale? I hope you can shed some light on this.

Thank you James my mentor! :)

Answer:

Because the nose is designed to both filter dirt from inspired air and to warm and humidify it, whereas the mouth is designed instead for eating, we practice yoga asana only while breathing through the nose, not the mouth. Moreover, there are nerve plexuses in the mucus lining of the nose that are connected to the sympathetic nervous system and which are stimulated when breathing through the nose, but not when breathing through the mouth. Yet another reason for preferring nasal to oral breathing lies in the fact that the brain generates a large amount of heat in the process of metabolizing glucose, and this excess body heat is carried from the brain to the nose by the venous blood. Once the hot blood enters the nose, its heat burden is relieved by heat exchange with the cooler incoming air, but only if the breathing is nasal. Should the brain overheat, the risk of stroke becomes significant. This could be a real problem, particularly with older students and living in the tropics.

Breathing through the nose allows us to control the back-pressure within the body, which provides internal support during asana practice. When you expel air quickly, there is the resulting collapse - think of a full balloon and then popping it. Then compare this to controlling the release of the balloon air slowly and how the balloon retains its firmness. In asana practice you want the body to retain its firmness to maintain the shape (both external and internal) and not collapse. Think of floppy students... it is not just muscular strength, but also internal air pressure. What holds a 2 ton car off the ground? Air in the tyres. How far are you going to drive with flat tyres?

Try this exercise... exhale firmly through the nose with a light internal grip in the throat/glottis (see Ujjayi Breath section in *The Key Muscles of Yoga* by Ray Long). Feel the controlled release in the chest. Then try it again, but exhaling through the mouth. Feel how the chest collapses.

Yoga philosophy teaches that air includes prana (life-force). The body extracts this prana in the area of the sinuses - on both the inhalation and exhalation. This is a good yogic argument for Ujjayi

Breathing - long, slow, steady and even. When we breathe through the mouth we miss out on 50% of the prana. Chronic mouth breathers are always chronically low energy. This is why yogis consider the regular use of a Neti Pot so important.

I am not shocked by the ill-informed cardiologist. Would you go to a cardiologist to ask about the stock market, or how to fix a plumbing problem? Just because they are experts in their field (and thank God they are), does not mean they know anything about other fields. How much yoga does this cardiologist do? What style of yoga? Who is his teacher? What is the cardiologist's teaching about the Bandhas or Drishti? Most likely he has never even heard of these techniques.

Lastly consider the relationship between form and function. The nose is designed for breathing and the mouth is designed for eating. The heart is designed for pumping blood and the kidneys are designed for filtering waste. Round wheels on a car are designed for rolling. What do you think would be the outcome of square wheels? Common sense goes a long ways...

Dear Silvia,

Did my explanation make sense? I always focus on the KISS principle, i.e. keep it simple and straightforward.

I forgot to include that the exhalation still contains significant amounts of oxygen; enough to resurrect a person via CPR. The out breath has plenty of prana in it and it is a waste to dump it out via the mouth.

Did you try the experiment with exhaling through the nose vs. the mouth? Could you feel the difference in your chest? Sometimes the best way to convince someone is via personal experience as opposed to verbal theory.

Also, the form and function concept is something to keep in mind for the future. For example, if you have an obese student, they will have malformed organs, you can be sure they are going to have health problems because the specific shape has been distorted. Round wheel vs. square wheel. There is a movement in the States called Fat Acceptance, where obese people focus on loving themselves. I can see psychologically it is not good to hate yourself, but there is also reality and no amount of wishful thinking or fantasy can change basic facts.