

ASTHMA AND THE BUTEYKO METHOD - A PERSONAL JOURNEY

Dorisse Neale

It was a familiar scene; a friend's overnight birthday party, lots of giggling 10 year old girls, and I was making more and more frequent trips to the bedroom where my asthma inhaler, which gave me instant relief from the discomfort, was hidden in my bag. Near midnight, I realized that my now severe wheezing was worsening, despite the last puff of medicine only 20 minutes ago. That eerie feeling began to set in, as fear and panic overtook me, as the gasping for breath began, and I began to fade...

Vaguely as if in a dream, I hear Elizabeth calling to her mother. "Mama, Dodie's got her asthma again, really bad." A call to my parents, a call to the doctor, a call to the ambulance. The next thing I know, I'm being lifted by strong, gentle arms which carry me to the waiting ambulance.

"Dodie, do you want us to put the siren on this time?" I hear a familiar voice ask. I smile and nod weakly; the siren makes me feel important. And then I'm gone...

When I come to the next day, I am in the hospital that I know so well, and there is my favorite red-headed nurse. I feel safe. I'm exhausted, but I can breathe. Aaahhh. Back to sleep. Later the nurse comes in prepared to start an intravenous line because I'm so dehydrated. I throw a feeble fit and insist that I be allowed to call Dr. Middlemas in protest. The red headed nurse knows me well and understands my irritability and fragility.

"Okay honey, I'll let you call him." She talks to him first, and then hands me the phone. I love this man who knows me so well. He agrees to wait as long as I drink 2 big glasses of water now and whenever the nurse brings me another. I guzzle the water triumphantly as she watches. Hooray! One less needle! I hate all the shots and needles that are so much a weekly part of my life, and I've already learned not to trust the nurses who always say, "This won't hurt." Truth is, it does hurt, every time.

By the next day, all is well and I'm up walking the halls in my pink robe and bunny slippers, helping the nurses. This is my home away from home, and of course, I want to be a nurse when I grow up.

Thirty years later, asthma had become my life's journey. Scenes similar to the one above had long ago become a regular occurrence. I had had hundreds of emergency hospitalizations, 30 years of steroid therapy, sixteen years of weekly allergy injections, including yearly trips to the asthma and allergy specialist where I would get tested with a series of 30-40 "shots" to determine what the next years' vial would include. As time went by, I grew to dread these trips. One year I ran away into the woods behind our house and hid, listening to my parents call for me, finally emerging victoriously once I knew that we had by now missed the scheduled appointment.

"My life's journey" ultimately became the vehicle through which I was able to experience and explore first hand so many of the different therapies available for asthma, and I tried them all; homeopathy, acupuncture, biofeedback, water cures, colonics, diets and fasting, Chinese and indigenous herbal medicine, yoga, rebirthing, holotropic breathwork, psychotherapy, hypnotherapy, isolation tanks, shamanic healings, massage, rolfing, aromatherapy, moxibustion, vitamins and supplements, and of course just about every pill and medication which allopathic medicine had to offer. All of them seemed to help, some more than others but eventually the asthma would return. I delved into the psychosomatic realm, and began to change the way I perceived this "condition" no longer referring to it as "my" asthma. And then one evening, while sorting through paperwork during an especially stressful time of my life I discovered Buteyko breathing, little knowing that it was to change my life forever.

The discovery came from an article sent to me by a friend (Mothering Magazine, March-April 1998, pgs 35-41).

ASTHMA AND THE BUTEYKO METHOD - A PERSONAL JOURNEY

Dorisse Neale

continued

I was astounded by what I read, since I had been a nurse for 20 years and asthmatic for 40, yet never had I heard an explanation of breathing such as this. I read the article 3 times, eager to understand this theory and technique. The next morning, during a brief visit to my daughters' school, a young girl came rushing into the office clutching her throat with a look of panic in her eyes and gasped, "I can't breathe, help me!" She had inhaled chalk dust while cleaning the erasers. I gently took her by the hand. "Come, I'll help you", I said and proceeded to teach her what I had read the night before. Twenty minutes later, her breathing calm, she looked at me and said, "I feel fine now and I'm not wheezing; thank you", and returned to her class. In that moment, I had a feeling that truly, I had touched upon my destiny. Stories like this were to become commonplace as I brought this new breathing method into my life; eventually I immersed myself fully into practice and study.

The link between asthma and hyperventilation, or overbreathing, has been observed throughout history and has been written about in medical literature since at least the 1940's. Chronic "hidden" hyperventilation is now being recognized as one of the underlying causes of all disease, and one of its most common symptoms is asthma. Normal breathing, as measured in liters of air flow in and out of the lungs per minute, is approximately 4-6 liters. Most asthmatics breathe 15-17 liters per minute on a regular basis, and during an acute attack, the air flow can increase up to 24-26 liters. At this rate, a vicious cycle is established which encourages spasm of the bronchi, inflammation of the airways. and a severely decreased efficiency of oxygen release into the blood stream.

The Buteyko Breathing Method seeks to break the cycle of hyperventilation, or overbreathing, by normalizing ventilation through a series of Eucapnic (defined as normal amounts of carbon dioxide) exercises, aimed at increasing carbon dioxide (CO₂) levels. There is a myth

in our modern world that CO₂ is a waste gas; in truth, it is only a waste gas in excess, as it is in fact essential for the utilization and release of oxygen into the body. CO₂ is a natural bronchodilator, as it relaxes the smooth muscle of the airways as well as decreasing inflammation. Hyperventilation leads to a loss of CO₂, which affects pH and ultimately every system of the body. By increasing CO₂ levels, oxygenation and circulation are improved throughout.

For an asthmatic, the essential work is to focus on slow, quiet, reducing breathing and to not let go into fear and panic; in other words to break the habitual cycle of hyperventilation that has become the norm. Studies have shown that when given a set of Eucapnic-Buteyko breathing tools, the asthmatic can begin to separate self (as in "my" asthma) from identification with what is only a symptom, NOT a disease, and can reclaim normal, deliciously fulfilling breaths. These "breathing tools" such as slow breathing, reduced volume breathing and breath holding on a gentle exhale work to rebalance the chemistry of the body by normalizing CO₂ levels, which in turn increases relaxation and oxygen utilization throughout every system in the body. As CO₂ levels rise and the breathing rate and depth decrease, as deep relaxation begins to inhabit the body, a frequently reported manifestation is a sense of euphoria, or well-being such as individuals have never known before.

The Eucapnic - Buteyko Breathing Method also teaches the importance of nasal breathing. One of the most common causes of CO₂ depletion in the body, in addition to hyperventilation, is exhaling through the mouth. The narrow air passages of the sinus cavities and nose make it possible for the body to retain needed CO₂, as well as activate the release of nitric oxide, also a vaso/bronchodilator, and found in highest concentrations in the paranasal

ASTHMA AND THE BUTEYKO METHOD - A PERSONAL JOURNEY

Dorisse Neale

continued

sinuses. Inhale through the nose is essential, as the air is filtered, moisturized and warmed prior to entering the delicate lung tissue. Repeated breath holding exercises can be used to unblock sinuses, as the quick increase of CO₂ which results opens the airways and allows for easy movement of air. One theory of asthma is that it is only the body's natural defense mechanism against exhaling large amounts of CO₂; this is why the passageways become narrowed and tight.

Results are often immediate as an individual with asthma begins to work on controlling symptoms with the breath vs. medication. Long term effects such as increased immune system health appear when higher CO₂ levels become permanent. At this point, awareness of breath, balanced, slower breaths, and nasal and abdominal breathing become the norm and need to be maintained on a regular basis, always and forever. When one is able to quiet the hyper- reactive breath and "respond" by choice to life and situations which arise, the benefits are beyond measure.

"I've learnt a lot about myself during these (breathing) sessions; it has taken me to the point of the genesis of my asthma which started when I was 3 or 4. Beyond that there is nothing as elemental as Breath, I believe it holds the keys to many gateways, the further you go the further you travel into yourself and the deeper the understanding of yourself. For an asthmatic there is an essential question - Why did my breathing become dysfunctional? Buteyko makes you confront this question head on. I thank Buteyko for bringing me closer to myself. I think anyone who has had a lifelong battle with asthma and is coming to grips with it through Buteyko will understand what I'm talking about." (Spring 2001, from the internet)

The Buteyko Breathing Method offers some of the most important and promising tools available to us today for reestablishing internal balance within our bodies, and reversing the devastating symptoms of asthma. Success depends on the willingness to apply the method when symptoms occur, and especially in the beginning, the

incorporation of regular 20-40 minute breathing sessions once to three times a day. Individuals feel a sense of control over their condition as they reclaim responsibility and gain confidence in their health. Children from the age of four have successfully learned the method, and their young bodies are especially receptive to early correction and prevention of potential lifelong imbalances. When a child knows that within, there is a place of self control of symptoms, they are less apt to loose themselves into the panic and fear often seen in the adults caring for them.

As for myself, I have finally broken my lifelong dependency on my precious inhaler. I still have one, and will occasionally take a puff, usually during one of those days where I have way too much going on, and do not take time for stillness. At times when I have mistakenly left the inhaler at home, I no longer panic. I am much less reactive in communication and am able to respond when necessary from a deep inner sense of peaceful well-being. I am confident that I will never again be hospitalized for this condition, and I feel that I owe my life to the awareness which has come to me through learning the Eucapnic-Buteyko Breathing Method.

A slogan recently caught my eye:

LIFE SHOULD TAKE YOUR BREATH AWAY, NOT ASTHMA...aahh yes, it does (and now I'm able to retrieve it immediately)!

Dorisse Neale, RN is a recovering life-time asthmatic, with a private practice in Respiratory and Buteyko Education, specializing in children, teens and all who desire greater health and well-being in their lives. She can be contacted by telephone at 707-823-3712 or through her website www.breathdance.org.