

Moshe Feldenkrais on breathing.

A transcript of a talk given at the 1976 Rotterdam public workshop.

First, a little introduction to breathing.

Many systems teach you how to breath. It's futile. Because you don't breath in the same way when you walk in the street, or when you run. You don't breath in the same way when a policeman gives you a ticket for your car. You don't breath in the same way when somebody kicks you in the ass. You don't breath the same way when you fight somebody. You don't breath the same way when you make love. Therefore, breathing is the thing you have to start with from the moment you are born until death -- and it should go on whether you are angry, whether you are successful, whether you are a failure, whether you like it or don't like it. That's what 'breathing' means.

If breathing is to help you through all these things, without making even more difficulties, how does one breath 'correctly' from the start without any connection with life. How can you breath correctly now and when you go out there and the policeman stops you with a ticket, or takes you into custody, you will see you're breathing is quite different. If you breath then as you breath now you will see what happens. The policeman will get angry because he wants you to respect him, and you have to breath [in a way that] he sees you are afraid of him.

After running 10 Kim's you can't breath in so many times and out so many times; so many seconds. You will be glad if you can breath at all, if you can last the 10 Kim's. The only way to do that is to so organise the 'breathing function' that it can face all these modalities [circumstances]. Therefore there is only one way. Take all the breathing apparatus and move it in such a way that it has not predelected thing; that it can organise itself in any way that is necessary. And when you do that you find that the breathing is completely different from what we know. And in fact there are more parts that work in breathing than we know. We know of the diaphragm and lungs. Well, you can see, a chest like that does not breath like a chest like this - even though both chests have a diaphragm and a lung, and a diaphragm and a lung. He has a chest that does not breath like hers. And his chest does not breath like that lady's, or that other man's.

Because the chest is not a simple thing. It's made of twelve pairs of ribs and some of them move and some of them don't. And if you have a scoliosis one side can move and the other side can't move.

Now the neck will affect the breathing enormously.

Your tongue will affect the breathing. You will see that some people cannot put out their tongue and touch here, or the nose. Most people have a tongue that is short and stiff.

There are floating ribs -- it means ribs that are not connected to the sternum. Obviously those ribs can move easier and open wider. And in fact the widest part of the lungs is where the floating ribs are.

But here, at the top [of the chest], at the clavicles, there are the small ribs of the chest. They are really small and stiff and you can't move them a tenth of an inch without making a tremendous effort. You can't breath with that part. But when you run a marathon you need even the movement there. But normally that part does not move.

Now the diaphragm. The diaphragm means all the intestines must move down when the diaphragm lowers here. Therefore, most people actually don't have any

diaphragmatic breathing, properly done. You have to learn that. People don't know at all.

When we stand and breath all the intestines lie on the pelvic floor, and they don't fall down. It's soft tissues. All the intestines with the food and everything and the water, they're 10 Kgs. They must be held. And therefore the pelvic floor must be strong otherwise you diaphragm can't move.

So you see it's more complex than it looks. That's why most people don't breath well anyway. Especially if they have an idea that it is meaning 'taking in air and taking out air'. It is. But the 'how' is the important thing.

First, you want to debunk all the wrong notions. The idea that you have to open the chest to breath in is not correct. That you have to lower the diaphragm to breath in is not correct. You can do it the other way around, once you know [how]. Therefore, it shows that the idea of what correct breathing is, is not enough studied. We know now only the most elementary things. You train the breathing to become a fixed, stable function, while it's a function that has to accompany us from the cradle to the grave. And [it] must provide enough oxygen to the brain whatever happens! Whether you are miserable or you are happy. Whether you are loved or hated. Whether you are beaten or you're a success. You still must breath to survive all that. Therefore, you must be adaptable. It's [breathing] is not a thing 'that way' and this is correct.

If you find me a breathing that is not concerned with a living thing I will show you what correct breathing is. It is a misnomer. There is no such thing as correct breathing. When it's 'correct', it's wrong. It must help every one of us to do the things that it does, efficiently, with some sort of satisfaction.

You've already learned that air comes in when the internal volume of the lungs is bigger. Then there is less air there, per unit volume, and then the air from the outside will go where there is lower pressure. So, if you increase the volume of the lungs -- whether you do that moving the chest forward, or sideways, or by bending, or by lowering the diaphragm, or by doing anything you want provided you enlarge the volume -- air will come in. You reduce the volume, air would come out. It does not matter whether you do it with the chest, the abdomen, the ribs, with whatever you do it. You open the chest a little bit and lower the abdomen more, then it will be diaphragmatic breathing. You can open the abdomen less and open the side ribs behind.

We will see, in practice, how we learn to do it so that it [breathing] becomes really good.



*We do not teach
The Correct Way to Breathe,
but all possible modes of breathing.*

*Moshe Feldenkrais
The Potent Self*