

The Oregonian

New book by two Portlanders helps us breathe our way to a better life

by John Foyston, The Oregonian

Wednesday March 04, 2009, 4:40 PM

Take a deep breath, suggest Portlanders Don Campbell and Al Lee in their new book, "[Perfect Breathing](#)" -- and keep doing so for the rest of your life to be healthier and better in touch with your emotions and spirituality.

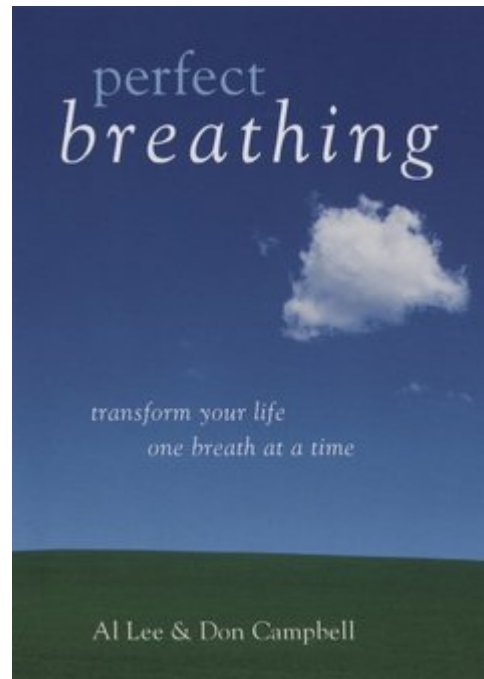
Campbell and Lee are longtime musicians and meditators (and Campbell is a contributor to The Oregonian) who know firsthand the calming power of what they call "conscious breathing."

Their book is a cross-cultural survey that includes anecdotes from traditional and holistic practitioners, quotes from yogis, authors and athletes, proverbs from ancient religions and citations from recent scientific studies.

"We knew a lot of ancient knowledge from yogis and qi gong and other disciplines about how central breath control is," says Campbell, "but we were amazed to find how much recent research also centers on the importance of proper breathing."

On this subject, disparate centuries, cultures and Eastern and Western traditions reach a rare consensus: Breathing is the most urgent and constant job of life on Earth, and our physical and mental well-being is directly founded upon deep, relaxed breathing. That's the kind of breath that most of us have forgotten how to take by the time we become adults, Lee and Campbell say.

Instead of the deep, diaphragmatic breathing that nourishes every cell in our bodies, we allow stress and poor posture to degrade our breathing to shallow, rapid sips taken from the top of the rib cage. That's the same



kind of breathing that stress induces through our "fight or flight" reflex -- and it's all very well when fleeing saber-tooth tigers or other acute threats.

But when stress becomes generalized, elevated levels of stress chemicals such as adrenaline and cortisol can damage our health.

"When the perceived threats are constant, when there is no threat that can be dealt with and dispatched," they write, "the body's stress response becomes toxic rather than lifesaving. The same chemicals that sharpened our senses ... now dull our mind, mood and memory. They suppress our immune system, constrict our blood flow and sap our strength and stamina."

Any number of studies show chronic stress to contribute to elevated blood sugar and cholesterol, hardening of the arteries, insomnia, depression and anxiety attacks -- all plagues of modern life.

The solution is as close as your next deep breath, say Campbell and Lee. "Our breath is an indispensable ally in the battle to counteract the harmful effects of stress," they write. "Almost every meditation, relaxation or emotional remedy includes an emphasis on the breath,

and it is our breath which is usually the first and best indicator of when stress begins to tighten its grip on us."

When you feel your breath become shallow and rapid, breathe deeply and slowly to calm your heart rate and begin to counteract stress; it's that simple. "We're not reinventing the wheel," Campbell says. "We're just giving people a couple of simple techniques of awareness and employment -- you don't need brand new cross-trainers or a gym membership to do this."

Deceptively simple might be the phrase, because the benefits of conscious, aware breathing affect all parts of life. Besides counteracting stress, proper breathing can

boost the immune system, aid healing and promote a sanguine state of mind.

Most powerfully, it reminds us to live in the here and now: A deep breath can shift our focus from the inaccessible past or future -- from regret or worry, too often -- to the present, which is really the only moment that we have.

Campbell and Lee teach a number of simple, powerful awareness exercises that require just minutes a day, because they know most people don't have an hour or more to devote to a new discipline, no matter how beneficial.

And, despite talk of the here and now and visualizations of breath entering the top of your head, collecting in your stomach as water and coursing through your body during exhalation, these guys are no crystal huggers.

"We consistently get responses such as, 'This changed my life,'" Campbell says. "Once people see this is not New-Age, woo-woo mumbo jumbo, but powerful techniques that will improve your life, people get religion -- people get it really quickly."

Which is more than Lee and Campbell can say about their publishing contract. They not only didn't get it really quickly, but they almost didn't get one at all.

"People liked the proposal," Lee says, "but not enough to write us a check."

Campbell agrees: "We had a couple of people say, 'Pay me \$1,500 and I'll start shopping your book around,' but we were pretty sure that wasn't the way it was supposed to work. For a couple of rubes from Oregon, cracking the New York publishing scene was quite a job."

Then Lee's wife, Alexis, had a chance cocktail-party conversation with popular Oregon author [Jean Auel](#), who said she'd like to read the book. When Auel heard that no contract was on the horizon, she suggested the pair send it to her agent with a note: "Jean Auel thought you might be interested in reading this."

That worked like a charm, and a contract was forthcoming, along with some suggestions that made a better book.

"The chapters were originally a series of essays from each source based on the interviews we'd done," Lee says. "But they said, 'No, that doesn't work so well -- you guys are the experts, you've done the work, so write in your voices.'"

-- John Foyston: 503-221-8368;
johnfoyston@news.oregonian.com;
blog.oregonlive.com/thebeerhere

"Perfect Breathing"

Al Lee and Don Campbell, 230 pages, Sterling; \$20

The six-second breath: Our normal respiration rate is 15 to 20 breaths a minute, but the authors say 10 breaths a minute is optimum for health. Here's how to achieve it: Inhale for two seconds; hold for one second; exhale for two seconds; hold for one second.

Foundation breath: This is another of Campbell and Lee's basic exercises. Sit comfortably, back straight, eyes closed and hands in lap. Exhale, then inhale deeply and exhale with a short burst, then a long, slow breath as you relax mind and body. Repeat three times or so to relax completely. Inhale deeply all the way to the bottom of your spine, progressively filling lungs, bottom, middle and top. Hold for a moment. Exhale slowly, emptying your lungs from bottom to top, gently squeezing out all the air. Hold for a moment and repeat as desired.

"Perfect Breathing" on YouTube: Watch demonstrations and condensed versions of the breath-control presentations that Al Lee gives to business and professional groups on [their YouTube page](#)