

The Breathable Body

From his new book, breathwork expert **Robert Litman** shares how awareness of your tongue, lips and teeth can help you to maximise the benefits of your breath

The practice of conscious breathing – of being ‘with breath’ to maximise awareness and wellbeing – is usually most effective when we attend to the position of our bodies. This means paying attention to how we sit, stand and lie down, as you might expect, but it also means paying attention to how we place our lips, tongue and teeth.

The average length of a human tongue is three inches. Our tongue is largely responsible for our speaking, tasting, swallowing and breathing, and is a wet structure with eight muscles and 2,000 to 4,000 taste buds.

Take a short baseline by noticing the position of your tongue, lips and teeth, and the flow and effort in your breathing before you begin.

To begin, try placing your tongue on the roof of your mouth, its tip lightly touching the first ridge behind the back of your upper teeth, while your lips are lightly touching and your teeth are in close proximity, a few millimetres apart.

Right behind your upper front teeth are a series of ridges. If you are unfamiliar with these structures, feel for them with clean hands. For some people, this isn't possible. If you're not able to place your tongue on the roof of your mouth, it may

be a good idea to look for an orofacial myofunctional therapist in your area who can evaluate your tongue's movement ability, recommend procedures that might extend it, and provide exercises that can strengthen and maintain tongue, teeth and lip positioning.

Placing your tongue in this position, along with nasal breathing, facilitates the epiglottis (a flap of cartilage which covers the trachea while we're eating to prevent food from entering the airway) lifting so that breath can flow easily down to the lungs. When you hold your tongue, lips and teeth in other positions, or use your mouth to breathe, the epiglottis is less responsive, and its placement can hinder the flow of breath.

Breathe mindfully in this posture for three to four breaths while noticing the flow and effort of your nasal breathing. For comparison, try placing your tongue in the middle of your mouth, not

touching the roof or the bottom, and see if you can feel how that affects the flow of your breathing. Then, rest your tongue on the floor of your mouth.

Sense and feel how these three positions affect the movement of breath down your throat. Which position provides the easiest pathway for breath? Most likely, your answer will be your tongue at the roof of your mouth. But don't strain to do this: remember that it isn't possible for everyone.

BREATH-SUPPORTING POSTURES

If you are able to, place your tongue on the roof of your mouth with the front tip directly behind your upper front teeth at the first ridge, while imagining your whole tongue as curved upward like the bowl of a spoon. The top of the tongue is meant to curl and lift upward so that it rests between the teeth on the left and

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TAKE A MINI-PAUSE

Breathe in through your nose, and then exhale through your nose. At the end of the exhale, suspend your breathing for three to five seconds, then resume nasal breathing. Repeat a few times if needed, until you feel a return to quiet breathing and feel your diaphragm and belly being responsive to your breath.

right along the hard palate, all the way back to the soft palate. This may be more of an energetic feeling than an actual connection between tongue and palate.

In *Breath: The New Science of a Lost Art*, James Nestor writes that over the past 200 years, humans' mouths have become both smaller and narrower. This can make it difficult to fit the tongue between the sides of the teeth and on the upper palate. The narrowing of the mouth actually lifts the upper palate and thus reduces the breathing space of the nose. Specialists in orofacial myofunctional therapy and dentists who specialise in airway function can help to address these issues.

Your lips are lightly sealed, and your teeth are a few millimetres apart. This position of your tongue, lips and teeth can help release tension and provide freedom of movement in the back of the skull and a softening of the shoulders, facilitating 'nesting and resting'. To get a feel for this lift of the tongue, try making an 'ack' sound, and feel the back of the tongue lifting.

The first time I tried this, my teeth began to chatter. I was so used to clenching my jaw, loosening the grip of protection felt threatening. Now, after a lot of practice and softening, and easing the tension in my throat and chest muscles, they no longer chatter. This helps my face, tongue and lips to rest, and reduces resistance in nasal breathing.

Bring this exploration to a close, then take another baseline of your awareness of the structures of your tongue, lips and teeth, and the flow and effort of breathing.

This way of holding your tongue, lips and teeth may be different from what you're used to. Check and feel for any release and freedom of movement at the

back of your head, and the overall alignment of head and spine.

You may also feel some additional core strength throughout your spine. Over time, as you find it more comfortable to hold your tongue, lips and teeth in this way, it may become the natural placement for you.

TRY THIS: HUM CLOCK

The following exploration can help you become more familiar with the interactive relationship between your tongue, lips and teeth. It's called the 'Hum Clock', and you'll be using the sound of a hum throughout. Try humming beforehand to get a feel for it.

1. Feel free to close your eyes. That eliminates visual distractions, and may enable a greater feeling for what you may be sensing. You'll be using your tongue to feel the variety of textures of your lips and teeth. Do it as a 'soft inquiry', probing your lips, teeth, and mouth with your tongue.
2. Begin by taking a baseline, noticing the textures and spatial arrangements of your mouth, lips and teeth as well as the flow of your breath. Move your tongue around your mouth to get a better idea of the territory.
3. Then, place your tongue as best you can between the inside of your lips and the front of your teeth and gums. Start at the 12 o'clock position (right below your nose). While resting your tongue there for a moment, gently hum on the exhale.
4. After one cycle of breath while humming, withdraw your tongue back into your mouth's cave. Then, take a silent breath or two and place your tongue between your lips and front teeth at the 1 o'clock position.
5. Inhale and then hum while at 1 o'clock. As you move clockwise around your mouth, practise each step (placing your tongue between your lips and teeth, humming, then withdrawing your tongue and taking a couple of breaths before once again moving your tongue out between your lips and the front of your teeth and gums), stopping at each number on the Hum Clock dial until you arrive back at the 12 o'clock position.
6. When you reach 12 o'clock position, repeat each step, moving anti-clockwise until you're back at 12 o'clock again.

7. Rest and notice the feel of your tongue, lips and teeth, along with any other information that comes into your awareness. Take time to integrate all that you may have discovered.

8. The next step is to explore the textures inside the cavity of your mouth. Use your tongue to move about your mouth, surveying the variety of wet, hard, and soft surfaces. Move about randomly. Explore the upper hard and soft palates, the lower palate, and what the tongue feels like in the middle of your mouth. Go slowly to feel your tongue's ability to touch all these surfaces, and its relationship to the cavity of your mouth.

9. Rest when you are ready, and take another baseline while noticing your level of awareness of these structures and your facility with resting your tongue on the roof of your mouth while your lips are lightly touching and your teeth are a few millimetres apart.

10. Repeating the sequence of any exploration deepens your knowledge and cultivates your innate intelligence. Try doing this practice one to three times, and you'll have a new experience of this most essential part of you.

Placing your tongue at the roof of your mouth increases your awareness of internal and external environments simultaneously. All your senses seem to benefit, as well as your presence with yourself, and your relationship with your environment. ●

Find out more...

● Extracted from *The Breathable Body: Transforming Your World and Your Life, One Breath at a Time* by Robert Litman (£12.99, Hay House), out now.

● thebreathablebody.com

