



“Ever watched Kipchoge run? If a man who runs a sub-2-hour marathon breathes predominately through his nose, there must be something to it.”

- Brian MacKenzie, 2023 *UltraRunning Magazine* article

- » Monks use breathing science missed.
- » One technique beats five prescriptions

Chapter 5

How Tibetan Monks Conquered Mount Everest With Nothing But Breathing

You're hiking at 12,000 feet. Your chest burns, and dark spots cloud your vision. You've spent \$200 on altitude pills – none of which are working. A 68-year-old monk walks past you, uphill, smiling and breathing easily. The difference? A breathing technique so simple it seems meaningless – yet it generates 15 times more oxygen-carrying capacity than normal breathing.

The Problem No Pill Could Fix

In 1924, George Mallory's Mount Everest expedition observed Tibetan monks carrying heavy loads to 17,000 feet while Britain's most elite climbers had to rest every hundred yards. The monks weren't even breathing hard. Now you're at 12,000 feet in the Colorado Rockies, your chest burning with every breath, dark spots dancing across your vision. You've already spent \$200 on altitude medication – Diamox, oxygen supplements, herbal pills – none of which are effective. A 68-year-old monk walks past you, uphill, smiling, and humming quietly to himself, not even breathing hard. This isn't just about age or fitness. Monks living at Rongbuk Monastery – perched at 16,340 feet on Mount Everest's north face – perform three hours of physical prostrations daily. No oxygen tanks, no pharmaceutical interventions – just an ancient breathing technique that science finally measured in 1998. The results? Their technique generates 15 times more nitric oxide than yours – a colorless gas that transforms how efficiently your blood delivers oxygen to every cell. Here's what Swedish researchers discovered and why it matters for anyone struggling at altitude.



1924: Elite British Climbers vs. 68-Year-Old Monks

Rongbuk Monastery isn't just high; it's the highest continuously inhabited religious site on Earth. At over 16,000 feet, simply walking requires effort, as the air contains 40% less oxygen than at sea level. Most climbers arriving at this elevation need days to acclimatize, moving slowly and rationing energy. Not the monks. When George Mallory's 1924 Mount Everest expedition passed through Rongbuk, the team's medical officer documented something inexplicable: monks carrying heavy loads to 17,000 feet while British climbers – among the most physically elite men in the world – had to rest every hundred yards. The monks weren't superhuman. They weren't born with larger lungs or thicker blood. They had simply discovered something Western medicine hadn't yet measured: the power of vibration-induced nitric oxide release. The secret lay in a practice so simple it seemed meaningless: humming during nasal breathing.

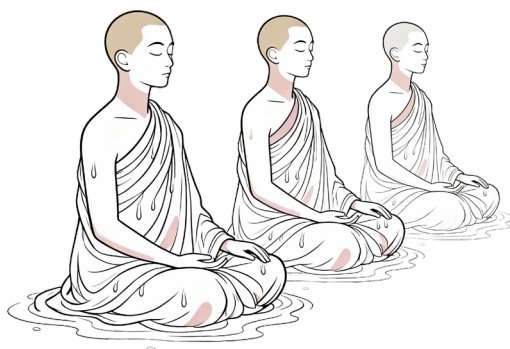
What Scientists Found When They Finally Listened

In 2002, Swedish researchers Eddie Weitzberg and Jon O.N. Lundberg published a landmark study in the *American Journal of Respiratory and Critical Care Medicine*. They inserted probes in people's noses to measure gas output during normal breathing and then again during humming. The results shocked them.

- Normal quiet breathing: 10 parts per billion (ppb) of nitric oxide
- Humming while breathing: 100–150 ppb – a fifteen-fold increase

When Weitzberg saw the readout showing 15 times normal levels, he thought the machine was broken – no human sinus cavity should store that much gas. They tested three more times, and the same impossible result occurred each time. The lead researcher called colleagues at midnight. The humming created oscillating airflow in the sinuses – those hollow spaces in your skull that medical textbooks once called “useless cavities.” It turns out they're nitric oxide factories, and humming is the key that unlocks them.

But what exactly is nitric oxide, and why does it matter? Nitric oxide (NO) is a signaling molecule your body produces naturally. When NO floods your bloodstream, your vessels open like highway lanes after rush hour. Oxygen reaches starving muscles, blood pressure drops without pills, and brain fog lifts. Five separate prescriptions – blood pressure meds, anxiety pills, sleep aids, focus stimulants, altitude medication – are replaced by vibration in your face. At altitude, where every molecule of oxygen counts, this 15-fold boost transforms your body's efficiency.



One Technique, Five Prescriptions Replaced

Herbert Benson, a Harvard cardiologist, spent the 1980s studying Tibetan monks in the Himalayas with the Dalai Lama's blessing. In 1985, his team filmed monks sitting outdoors in zero-degree weather wrapped in soaking wet sheets. His Harvard colleagues said hypothermia would kill them in minutes, but the sheets were bone-dry in an hour. His team measured extraordinary physiological control: monks raised their finger and toe temperatures by 17 degrees Fahrenheit through meditation alone. But the breathing discoveries went further. The monks used these techniques for:

- Altitude adaptation (preventing and treating mountain sickness)
- Anxiety reduction (calming the nervous system)
- Sleep improvement (deeper, more restorative rest)
- Blood pressure regulation (reducing hypertension)
- Mental focus (enhanced concentration)

Your doctor writes five prescriptions, while the monk taps his nose once. When nitric oxide drops, multiple systems fail. Blood pressure spikes by 20 mmHg, cognitive function drops by 30%, blood vessels constrict, and oxygen delivery plummets. When NO levels rise through proper breathing, everything reverses. In 1987, a Western cardiologist visited Drepung Monastery near Lhasa and asked about their cardiovascular pharmacy. The monk laughed and pointed to his nose. "This is our medicine chest."



Why Elite Athletes Are Relearning Ancient Wisdom

Modern sports science eventually caught up with monastery science – about 1,000 years later. In 2019, Eliud Kipchoge broke the two-hour marathon barrier. Multiple cameras captured his breathing throughout the 26.2-mile race. Sports scientists analyzing the footage noticed something unusual: Kipchoge breathed predominantly through his nose, even at world-record pace. His pacers were mouth-breathing and dropped out. He nose-breathed for 26.2 miles and made history. Brian MacKenzie, a leading breathing coach who's trained thousands of athletes, points to Kipchoge as proof: "If someone running a sub-2-hour marathon breathes mostly through his nose, there must be something to it."

The science backs this up. An 8-week study of nasal breathing training showed VO₂ max increases of 12% – a massive gain in aerobic capacity. Research published in the *Journal of Applied Physiology* found 23% blood pressure reductions in hypertensive subjects using daily nasal humming protocols. Compare this to nitric oxide supplements: \$50 per month, inconsistent results, and sometimes no effect at all. Humming costs nothing and produces 5–7 times more nitric oxide than oral supplements. Kenyan runners train at 8,000 feet in Iten – "home of champions" – where low oxygen forces superior breathing adaptation. They don't just run more miles; they breathe more efficiently, maximizing every molecule of available oxygen.

One caveat: A 2021 meta-analysis found about 15% of individuals show minimal blood pressure response to nitric oxide interventions due to genetic variations. For the other 85%, the benefits are significant and measurable.

The 7-Day Protocol: From Monks to You

What took monks 1,000 years to perfect takes you exactly 14 days to learn. This technique requires five minutes, no equipment, and no mountain. Most people breathe through their mouths all day, completely bypassing their sinus stores. Those hollow cavities fill with nitric oxide that never gets released, never enters your bloodstream, and never dilates your vessels. Here's how to change that.

Days 1-3: Foundation (5 minutes daily)



1. Sit upright with your back straight (in a chair or on the floor).
2. Close your mouth completely.
3. Inhale through your nose for 4 seconds (feel your belly expand, not your chest).
4. Exhale while humming for 6 seconds – any comfortable pitch, at conversational volume.
5. Feel the vibration in your sinuses, cheeks, and forehead (this is crucial – no vibration means insufficient volume).
6. Complete 20 cycles (about 5 minutes total).
7. Do this before breakfast for optimal results.

What you'll notice:

- First session: Slight tingling or warmth in your face, possible light-headedness (completely normal as your body adjusts).
- Days 2-3: Nose breathing throughout the day becomes easier and more natural.
- Days 5-7: Noticeable improvement in exercise recovery and reduced breathlessness.



Days 4-7: Building Capacity (10 min)

Continue the same technique, but increase to 40 cycles (10 minutes). You'll find the practice becomes easier, your breath deeper, and your mind calmer

Week 2 & Beyond: Full Protocol (20 min)

Build to 60 cycles (20 minutes). This is where significant cardiovascular benefits appear. Blood pressure changes become measurable. Sleep quality improves. Mental clarity sharpens

Troubleshooting Common Issues:

- Dizzy or light-headed? Shorten your exhale to 4 seconds initially. Build back to 6 seconds over several days.
- Can't feel vibration? Hum louder until you distinctly feel your facial bones vibrating. This confirms proper sinus activation.
- Mouth breather by habit? Use medical tape (3M Micropore) over your mouth at night. This re-trains your breathing pattern while you sleep – a technique sleep researchers now recommend for better oxygenation.



Implementation Checklist

Week 1:

- Set daily alarm for your 5-minute morning practice.
- Practice until you distinctly feel sinus vibration during humming.
- Track any changes: energy levels, breathing ease, exercise tolerance.
- Day 7: Increase to 10-minute sessions.



Week 2:

- If tracking blood pressure, measure at the start and end of the week.
- Build to 20-minute sessions.
- Monitor: resting heart rate, ease with stairs/hills, sleep quality, mental clarity.



Month 1:

- Make this as automatic as brushing your teeth – same time, same place.
- Notice cumulative effects: sustained energy, faster recovery, clearer thinking

Frequently Asked Questions

How did Swedish researchers accidentally discover the monks' secret?

In 2002, Swedish researchers Weitzberg and Lundberg measured nitric oxide levels during humming and found a 15-fold increase compared to quiet breathing. They initially thought their equipment malfunctioned. The humming created oscillating airflow that dramatically increased gas exchange in the sinuses.

What makes Herbert Benson's monk research even more remarkable?

Harvard's Benson documented monks in 1981 drying cold, wet sheets placed on their shoulders in 40-degree rooms using only body heat from meditation. His team also filmed monks sleeping on a 15,000-foot ledge in zero-degree weather wearing only shawls, without shivering.

Did Eliud Kipchoge really nose-breathe through his marathon, or is this athletic mythology?

Video from Kipchoge's sub-2-hour marathon shows him clearly nose-breathing while his pacers mouth-breathed. Kenyan runners train at 8,000 feet in Iten, forcing superior breathing adaptation that maximizes oxygen delivery. The evidence confirms this technique is real.

Why does the chapter's "15x more nitric oxide" claim matter physiologically?

The Swedish study measured nitric oxide increasing from 10 parts per billion to 100-150 ppb during humming. Nitric oxide dilates blood vessels, improving oxygen delivery. At altitude where every oxygen molecule counts, this efficiency boost transforms performance.

What's the scientific mechanism that makes humming work better than supplements?

Humming creates oscillating airflow that increases gas exchange between sinus cavities and nasal passages. Your sinuses continuously produce nitric oxide, but without humming vibration, most remains trapped. This accesses existing production rather than supplementing externally.

What does the "15% non-responder" caveat actually mean for readers?

About 15% of people have genetic variations affecting nitric oxide production or response. For the 85% majority, benefits are significant. Try the seven-day protocol and track your response. If you notice improvements within two weeks, you're likely a responder.

Real Results: The Accountant's Story

A 52-year-old accountant in Boston started this protocol after reading about it. Day one felt strange. By day three, he noticed that stairs didn't wind him. By day 14, his blood pressure had dropped 18 points – enough for his doctor (with approval and monitoring) to reduce his medication dosage. Not everyone responds identically, but the mechanism is consistent: more nitric oxide means wider blood vessels, better oxygen delivery, and improved performance across multiple systems.



Why This Works When Pills Don't

The pharmaceutical approach treats symptoms separately. High blood pressure gets one pill, anxiety gets another, poor sleep needs a third, and altitude sickness requires a fourth. The breathing approach addresses the root cause: insufficient nitric oxide disrupts multiple body systems simultaneously. Fix the root, and symptoms across the board improve. Monks perfected this over a millennium, science validated it in 1998, elite athletes now use it, and doctors are beginning to prescribe it. Your sinuses have been storing gas you didn't know you had. Five minutes tomorrow morning – that's all. The monks at 16,000 feet aren't superhuman; they're just breathing correctly

Tibetan Breath Control: Dr. McMillan's Clinical Perspective

There is some suggestion that breath-holding practices raise nitric oxide, and the broader health benefits of these traditions are hard to dispute. But I would offer a note of caution about crediting breath control alone. In my view, the more powerful element may be that the breathing is paired with chanting, sustained vocal vibration that engages the nervous and vascular systems together. It is plausibly the combination, rather than any single component, that does the work. I would rather present this as a compelling idea still being understood than overstate a mechanism we have not fully pinned down.

