

Tai Chi Breathing

(Or the secret art of doing nothing whatsoever with the breath)

Writing an article about breathing was never going to be easy. Firstly I did not want it to be just an essay on the various techniques used, as that would only complicate and confuse what is a simple, natural practice. Tai Chi breathing is not about adopting a specific technique to add to the ever expanding portfolio of forms and exercises learned. Instead, it is more important to simply manoeuvre the posture of the body in order to make your own breathing deepen and relax so that it feels part of and integral to the whole body movement. This relaxed deep quality to the breathing stills the mind and achieves in later stages a clear focus of intention that gives a positive open attitude on to the world.

That said there are basic, fundamental requirements of both structure and mental intention to organise Tai Chi breathing into a coherent pattern that the body finds useful both for health and for the advancement of one's Tai Chi practice.

We call the Tai Chi breathing “the natural breath”, because it is the pattern of breathing observed in small children, before the various forces that shape and mould our thoughts, feeling and coping strategies for life impose themselves on the maturing body, and breathing in particular. This quality of breath when observed is seen to expand the abdomen on the in breath and relax on the out breath. See fig.5. It can and generally does take time to do this effectively and is best achieved for Tai chi purposes in the standing Wu Chi position. Using this Wu Chi posture fig.1 we can develop a clear sense of stillness.

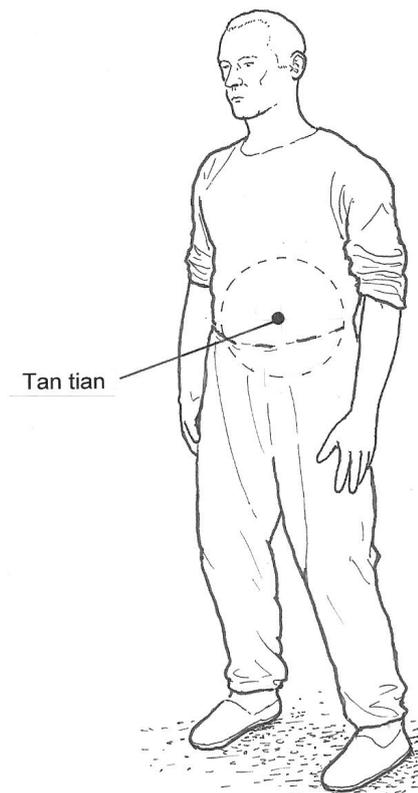


Fig. 1 Wu chi

The breathing then fully sinks and settles into the Tan Tian (See fig 1). Once the breathing returns to this simple pattern, it has a profound effect on the rhythm, health and general wellbeing of the body. To force this natural change or to attempt to

impose a pattern onto ones breathing without giving time for allowing this natural letting go and sinking to manifest is in fact a form of self-imposed tension and not to be esteemed too highly. Consider the fact that you don't have to consciously change your breathing pattern if you are running for a bus or engaged in a delicate operation like threading a needle. So with Tai Chi, as you relax, the breathing will also change and adapt to your ever-developing practice.

Breathing is one of the main ways the body replenishes its energy. We do it subconsciously from the moment we are born to the last breath we ever take. Yet it is so simple it generally goes unnoticed unless symptoms like asthma, bronchitis or shortness of breath bring it to our conscious attention. Breathing is the nearest tangible and recognisable thing to being alive, hence an unconscious person is usually first checked for any signs of breathing. It is not too much of an obvious cliché to say that to breathe is the most basic fundamental thing we can do in order to live, without it we can only stay alive for a few minutes. Breath gives us consciousness. It is intimately linked to our emotions and our psyche. The Chinese expression Chi means breath or life force. The word Psyche comes from a Greek goddess whose name means breath, usually associated with the idea of life or soul. In mythology the gods are often said to have breathed life into mortals to animate them, again indicating that the idea of breath is intimately bound up with one's psychological and emotional state and of course one's spirit. We use everyday expressions like "breathtaking", "breathless with excitement". Even to be inspired means to draw in breath, to draw in the spirit of heaven, which describes the intimate relationship the breath has in connecting us to the outside world.

The breathing is unique, for of all the internal processes it is one that we can consciously affect. So though our emotional and conscious state affects how we breathe; for instance, when we are shocked, physically angry or excited. How we breathe physically can also conversely affect our emotional state. It is something we generally take for granted and so spend little time considering the how and the why. Breathing is part of our autonomic nervous system, yet because it is able to be controlled consciously we can learn through relaxed breathing to control and refine our nervous system's response to both internal and external stimuli. It is the reason why so many esoteric practices develop more and more complex breathing practices, to affect their emotional and psychological states.

One of the most frequently asked questions by students new to a Tai Chi class is, “What is the breathing method in Tai Chi practice?” How do we breathe?

The misconception here is that Tai Chi is often placed in that same group as yoga or meditation. So it can be a little disappointing to some when I tell them the real secret to breathing as taught by my teacher to me is, “not to worry about it; just keep the breathing relaxed. There is enough to learn in Tai Chi without adding to the problems.”

The Yi, intent moves the Chi. Therefore, if you are concentrating on how and where to breathe, your mind can become too internally focused, which in turn will stagnate the Chi. There are, of course, times when holding or drawing the Chi into the Tan Tian is appropriate, for instance during some Chi Kung practices and especially to settle the Chi at the end of one’s practice but not when you are practising the Tai Chi forms as the general aim in tai chi is to direct the chi outwards using Yi. Because of this we get into the differences in Chi Kung styles and energy practices generally which in this article I will assiduously attempt to avoid.

Breathing is so spontaneous, so natural an act, that to explore breathing technique per se, seems pointless. It is more relevant to discuss and explore the quality of the breath and how this is bound up with our practice and development of Tai Chi and Chi Kung, which is succinctly expressed in this Chi Kung poem:

Healthy person breathes from the tan tien

A sick person breathes from the chest

A dying person breathes from the throat

And a sage breathes from his heels

The Tan tien is in effect the lower abdomen, the navel (see fig 1&3). When we can guide the breath to this point or area, then we will have a strong, full breath, a good oxygen intake and a healthy, balanced system. The aim in Tai Chi practice is to cultivate this natural way of breathing. Natural breathing is also called postnatal breathing or diaphragmatic breathing this is because it resembles the breath a child might take before the nefarious conditionings life can and often does impose on our system.

The diaphragm that separates the upper and middle part of the torso is a muscle like any other muscle in the body it is attached to the sternum and the costal cartilages of the last six ribs and the lumbar vertebrae. It is used exclusively for breathing and as the muscle is also under a certain amount of conscious control, it can be trained. Be warned - if we force the breathing then this muscle, which influences about 75% of our breathing (the ribs and intercostals muscles the other 25%), is in danger of becoming over stretched or strained just like any other muscle and can physically weaken the whole system. Conversely, if it is not exercised then the breath can become restricted, tense and tight, and this sense of restriction is transferred to the whole system.

If you were to ask any number of people, "Show me where your lungs are", they will generally indicate to their chest. While correct, it is not the whole truth, as there more lung tissue to the rear and deep to the side in the lower rib cage. (See fig 2). Yet if you ask a person to consciously take a deep breath in, one may readily see the front of the chest rise up and the back will arch in and the arms will close into the body what is referred to as the classical military pose (see fig 3). If you look at the front and back of someone in this classic posture, it looks strong and imposing from the front but the back looks weak and ineffectual Unfortunately it fails to utilise the full capacity and power of the lungs, which has a greater capacity to the back and sides of the body. By relaxing the chest and shoulders and plucking up the back and opening under the armpits as asked for in Tai Chi and is the complete opposite of the military pose, we are, in effect, maximising the ability of our lungs to draw in air.

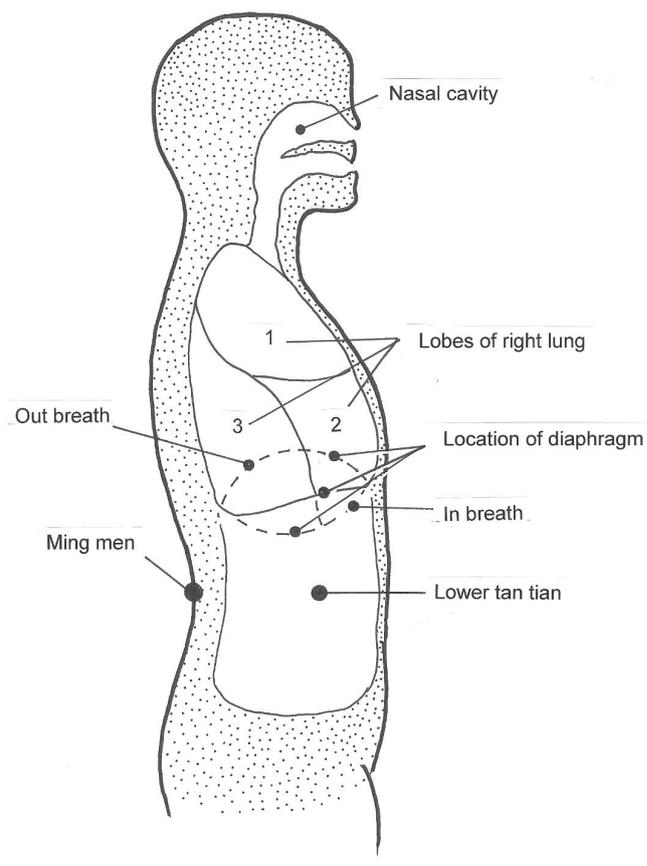


Fig 2 lobes of lungs right side

This brings us nicely onto the posture. What happens initially with the relaxed natural breathing is that some people can find it difficult to guide the breath to the abdomen. In fig. 2, lobe one of the lungs is uppermost; focusing here will open and lift the chest not allowing either a full breath to reach lobes two and three or the breath to sink to the tan tien. If we alter our posture in this respect by opening across the back, tucking the tailbone down and opening the Ming Men area, the chest or sternum naturally sinks. This is a physical manifestation of the Traditional Chinese medical concept of the “Kidneys anchoring the breath The Ming Men (fig.2) is the centre of the Kidney energy and is also the back of the tan tien so by guiding the breath to this area we both support the kidney function and build chi in the centre.

A common fault can be to overly sink the chest. Students often collapse the chest inwards instead of a natural downward direction restricting downward movement and pushes our tan tien backwards to the detriment of our balance. The sternum rises and falls with ordinary upper chest breathing, relaxing and sinking the sternum will gently control this movement minimizing the rising and sinking. But be careful forcing it down will restrict and stagnate the breathing and distort the posture. The opposite extreme can be true especially in Yang style Tai Chi if the upright posture is over-worked, the spine arches back too much and once again the sternum and chest rise excessively. Even with the breath focused in the tan tien there can be an initial tendency to overly expand the abdomen forward to the navel, this too can close off the back and also make the chi rise up the front instead of the back thus restricting good chi circulation, and a reason why the ming men can be a viable alternate focus to rebalance the breathing and the chi circulation in the lower abdomen.

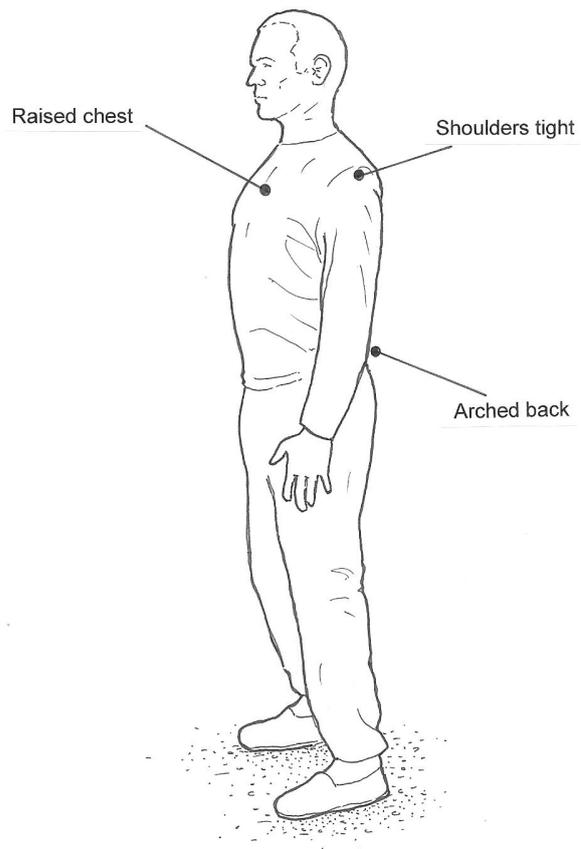


Fig 3 military posture

There is an interesting correlation between this posture and the Tai Chi concept of Chi circulation which it is said should adhere to the back and so permeate the spine (Wang Tsung Yuehs thirteen postures of chi circulatory movement, Revelation page 55). In Chinese meridian theory, the back is the most Yang part of the torso in comparison to the Yin of the soft under-belly or the front of the torso. With asthma sufferers a similar posture to sinking the chest and opening the back as in tai chi is used to calm down an attack, here though the elbows are supported on a table while seated, again aiding and strengthening the Kidney ability to anchor the breath in the body.

Opening up under the armpits to extend the arms also plays an important role in breathing as it stretches the numerous external and internal intercostal muscles that aid respiration. It is useful to monitor the scapulae (shoulder blades) to check for an imbalance. If the intercostal muscles are tight, the scapulae wing out from the spine rather than normally-positioned flat against the back. In some cases, this can be a predisposition to emotional problems like worry, anxiety and or being defensive. One will naturally find that by diligent training all aspects of the Tai Chi posture and the breath, the body relaxes to strengthen and open naturally. This simple practice of breathing has many other subtle therapeutic benefits.

The Nei Jing one of the oldest medical texts in China relates in simple terms to the Lungs as a Prime Minister whose function affects all the rhythms of the body and mind. The Lungs receive pure Chi from the outside and through proper cultivation of breath, make it available for the body on the inside. To do this, the Chi has to be received by the lower Tan Tian. The breath therefore has to be guided to the lower abdomen this is achieved by regular chi kung practice and regular postural correction. Tan Tian is often translated as field of elixir or medicine field. This is the reasoning behind the phrase "*a healthy person breathes to the Tan Tian*".

If we view the body as part of a holistic landscape, our nervous system perceives the world we inhabit and the breath, drawing in and releasing connects us to it. External factors like various climatic conditions: heat, damp, cold, were seen to mirror and affect the predisposition of the internal body. So we can readily start to perceive the holistic idea of man as a reflection of the external climatic landscape. Where just as fluctuations in barometric pressure create external climatic conditions, we can see that fluctuations in internal atmospheric pressure of the body (by that I mean the way we breathe) readily affects the body's internal emotional climate. Internally we can

refer to them as patterns of emotional behaviour, Heat will relate to excitability; cold to a dour nature not wanting to participate; damp to being stuck either mentally or, physically, Wind can stir things up leading to an erratic unpredictable nature. Think of the breathing, if one gets anxious, excited or angry, sad or reflective. “Hot-tempered” or “of a cold disposition” are terms used to reflect this inner temperature change. Breathing patterns can influence one’s emotional behaviour and visa-versa. How we breathe can therefore become a simple way to see our health. This is what is meant by “*a sick person breathes to the chest.*”

Beneficial friction

One of the fundamental practices for health is to allow the body’s internal organs to move and interact naturally with each other. This is often described as “beneficial friction”. What is not often understood is that the internal organs do not just hang in empty space inside the body but are close together and very active. The intestines have peristaltic action; the stomach churns the food; the liver’s smooth undulation releases various chemicals for digestion and other functions; the bladder expands and contracts; kidneys are filtering and processing blood; the heart pumps blood. All this internal movement, this activity, creates heat. Heat radiates and disperses throughout the body. However, with restrictive movement or bad posture, the organs get compressed increasing the heat in the system, over taxing the system and making the various functions break down becoming sluggish and inefficient. Indeed many massage therapies make a specific practice of abdominal massage to strengthen the overall health of the system, and quality of the abdomen reflects the general health of the body

Natural Tai Chi breathing will aid this process of beneficial internal massage, thus keeping the body regulated, vital and healthy. Breathing is doubly important if you consider the way we have evolved to stand upright and move, with the body braced against gravity, taut and upright the organs that hang from the spine can have a tendency to sag under the force of gravity. In our modern society we can be sat at a desk or in front of the television for hours or performing a repetitive single type of movement.

We can see how the body can get stuck and fixed, the organs compressed and uncomfortable. This leads invariably to a build up of stress. With continuous poor body management we potentially have the makings of a vicious downward spiral of physiological and physical ill health. By simply getting up and performing some

simple relaxed breathing with Tai Chi movement, we can start the process of rebalancing the body, stimulate it to be free from fatigue and ultimately maintain a healthy internal environment and with the increased uptake of fresh oxygen in the system, a better working relationship to your external environment.

Quality of breath

What happens when we start to breathe is that we often try too hard to get it right. These qualities outlined below have a tendency to arise during all areas of Tai Chi practice when we are learning. Before I list them, I do not want you to judge yourself on a scale, as I have found that they change with circumstance and internal pressure and so forth.

1. Audible breath

This quality has a tendency to scatter the concentration and composure. It is about trying to release, open up, sighing or heavy breathing, though fatigue is an audible breath. Generally speaking, if you can hear your breath then it is audible.

2. Gasping breath

This is when something is obstructed or injured. It can indicate an internal tension, holding on to something, often experienced in pushing against a stronger person. Or it could be a sign of physical exhaustion. It is generally not audible but can have audible qualities in it. Basically the breath still has difficulties. A gasping breath tends to have its focus on the mouth. I am always put in mind of the action of a fish out of water with this quality breathing through the mouth.

3. Coarse breath

A coarse breath tires you out by forcing, trying to breathe correctly because it is still under the control of the mind and to a degree the ego. It could be either breathing in or alternatively breathing out for too long a period which can lead back to the gasping style of breath but generally it is free of the first two qualities but it can still be refined.

4. Natural or Restful breath

The restful breath is of a steady, even rhythm, slow and deep. It is as though you are not aware of the breath. This is called a fine breath. This breath stills the mind, balances and unites the whole system. Often there is talk and practice of holding the

breath but this is not the case. This idea has been erroneously transmitted, perhaps because the restful breath is so light, natural and refined, it appears as though the breath is held or suspended

Other considerations

The other question asked in regard to breathing is. “Do I breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth?” Breathing through the mouth creates shallow breathing. It brings air to the front of the chest, while breathing through the nose has a tendency to deepen the breath and activate the diaphragm.

“Does the tongue have to sit on the roof of the mouth?” The answer to that is yes, it does but again, if you keep your mouth closed, the tongue naturally finds its position. So do not force or contort it into a tense position. (See fig 4)

Excessive concentration on the Tan Tian as mentioned earlier can lead to over-expanding the lower abdomen, giving a feeling of bloating, fullness and excessive heat in the body. If this happens, take your concentration to the Ming Men point in the middle of the lower back.

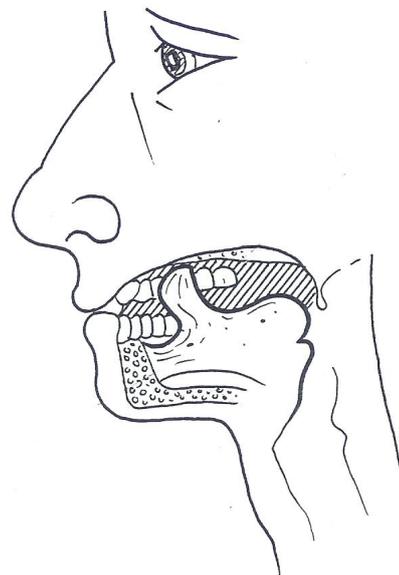


Fig 4 Position of tongue on palate

Ongoing practice

Tai Chi's relaxed quality integrates the movement and the breath that can bring about a change in the physical, emotional and psychological balance of the person. Breathing is not exempt from this rule of relaxed movement. One must always endeavour to keep the breathing comfortable and effortless, allowing the breath's natural rhythms to transform to the more subtle internal breath or Chi and then to circulate it naturally.

Breathing in generally makes the Chi rise to the extremities, which is of benefit, but then breathing out settles it in the Tan Tian once more. If we persist with this type of breathing, the breath becomes rhythmical but not complete and gaps appear in the

energy system. With this in mind, it can be appreciated that breathing is only one part in the development of internal strength. the ability to sink the chi loosen the waist lift the back hollow the chest relaxing the elbows open and extend the joints all play their part in the transformation of the breath into chi and chi into spirit, under the guidance not of the breath, but of the shen, the heart. This gives rise to the power of Gu dang or resonating drum. Where no gaps appear in the system Gu dang is the resonating field of the unified whole.

According to Chuang Tsu the Taoist philosopher, “an individual rests on his heels.” In Tai chi when the breathing is deep and extended throughout the system the chi can rise to the crown of the head and sink to the heels, the breath has been refined into the subtle breath or chi and can then circulate fully by internal pathways to the extremities this is the meaning behind the idea that a sage breaths to the heels. To issue power through the system the chi has to rise from the feet, any change in ones ability to root, in proper use of the substantial and insubstantial will affect the circulation of chi and integration of body mind.

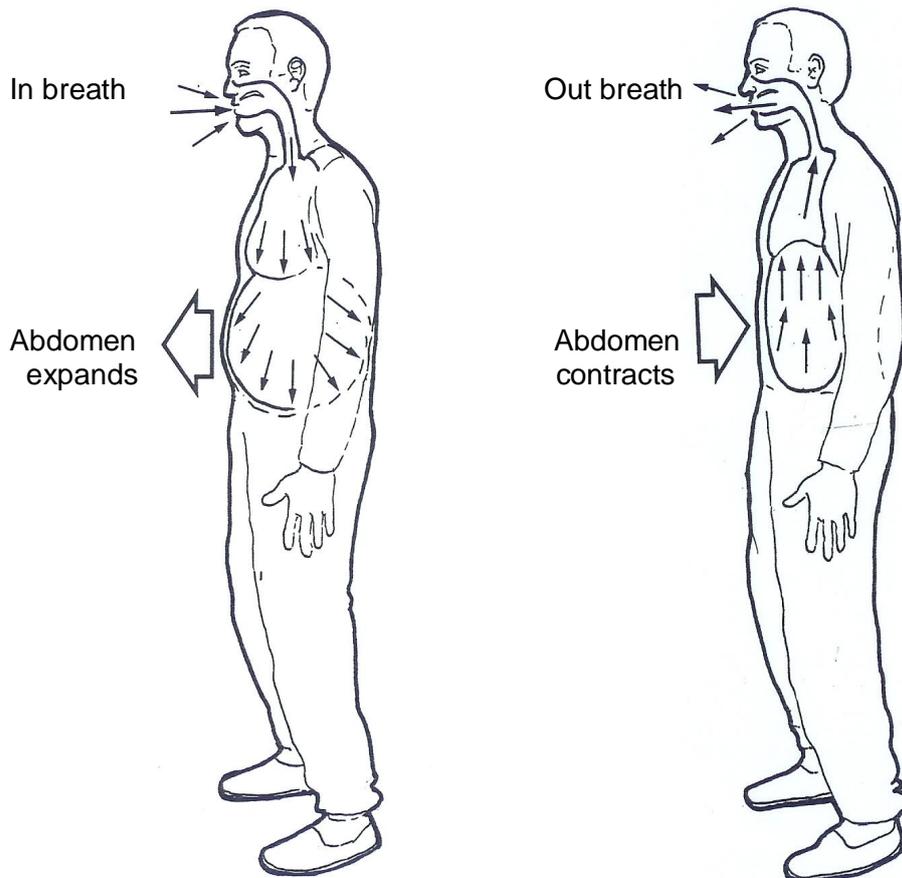


Fig. 5 Natural breathing

Conclusion

What I have tried to show is that the breathing is only one part of the Tai Chi, albeit an important one. These are a lot of words to simply say, "Relax, don't worry, just let the breathing be," yet describing nothing, describing space, is difficult, and one can invariably end up describing the form that surrounds it. The Tao Te Ching sums it up perfectly:

***Thirty spokes join at the hub.
Their use for the cart is where they are not.
When a potter's wheel makes a pot,
The use of the pot is precisely where there is nothing.
When you open doors and windows for a room,
It is where there is nothing that they have use for the room.
Therefore being is for benefit, non-being is for usefulness.***

Breathing is still part internal, part external. But it is the ability to relax and create the space that makes breathing of benefit and allows us to make Tai Chi practice grow and so become useful.

One of the most familiar images of Tai Chi is of a practitioner under a group of trees in the early morning moving slowly, effortlessly, rhythmically, as though in harmony with a cosmic pulse - with the very breath of life.

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