

## **Breathing Practice in Tai Chi Chuan**

Breath is what keeps us alive, without breath our lives are over. Learning to breathe properly then is of utmost importance. In traditions all over Asia breath control has been practiced as a way to change consciousness in the practitioner. In Tai Chi we use the breath as a method to heal the body. This healing takes place as the breath enters in places it has never gone before. In the beginning it is good to imagine that the breath can move freely throughout the body easily directed by the mind. The way to begin practicing this is by putting your breath in your navel (Tan Tien) with your mind. Once this is mastered you can direct the breath into places in your body that have illness or pain. During Tai Chi form practice the breath should fill up the whole body like filling a glass with water. There should be no place that the breath does not go in your body. If there is a place that the breath can't go then you need to put awareness in that place. At first you work on purifying the meridians in the body, and then you work on purifying the organs and skeletal structure. The breath should go through your nose whenever possible with the mouth closed. In the Taoist tradition, this creates a seal for the energy you have cultivated. If you have saliva in your mouth always swallow it, this saliva has special healing qualities for your stomach. This also circulates the chi in your stomach and increases your digestive juices.

There are a couple rules for the breath practice or words that can help you in your practice. The words, "slow", "deep", "fine" and "long" are synonyms for the breath in Tai Chi. The word slow means that the breath is like pulling a thin thread through the eye of a needle. This implies that the breath is very gradual and at the same time mindful. The word deep means that the breath should drop like a pebble into a deep lake. This implies that this dropping goes throughout the body and penetrates deeply into even the cells. The word fine means that the breath is imperceptible to the ear or to touch. If you are standing next to a Tai Chi player you shouldn't be able to hear them breathe, and if you put their hand under their nose you shouldn't feel the air go through the nose. The word long means that the breath is extended and longer than we breathe normally. This extension of breath creates a relaxation response in the body, similar to going to sleep. These four words are guidelines for doing the breath during the form.

The next part of practicing the breath is how and where to insert it in the postures. In general there are two rules for moving with the breath. The first is that you inhale as you lift your hands and exhale as you drop them. The second is that you inhale as you shift forward and exhale as you shift back. This also applies to stepping, as you step forward or backward you exhale and then the shifting forward on to the leg you inhale. Each posture can also have specific breath control practices, for this you need individual instruction. As mentioned above, the weight shift directly cooperates with the breath and visa versa. This type of emphasis on breath makes Tai Chi a Chi Gung practice par excellence. When the breath moves the body completely the form is no longer necessary and every movement is Tai Chi, all your movements become expanding and contracting like the tides of the ocean.