

Abdominal Breathing

Tai Chi Qigong uses abdominal breathing or diaphragmatic breathing. Abdominal breathing means using the diaphragm to breathe fully into the bottom of the lungs. Tai Chi Qigong movements are co-coordinated with the breath.

Abdominal breathing is a slower, longer and deeper type of breathing, using more of the lung's capacity than during shallower, chest breathing which tends to be rapid and takes more effort to get air into the lungs. Abdominal breathing has the advantage of allowing for more efficient gaseous exchange to occur with each breath, it gently massages the abdominal organs, increasing blood flow and improving circulation, providing more oxygen for the body's cells and a more efficient elimination of carbon dioxide, especially when combined with the slow, graceful movements of Tai Chi Qigong.

Babies naturally breathe abdominally but as we grow, often into stressful lives, we 'learn' to breathe incorrectly and have a tendency to breathe shallower. Stress and holding our stomachs in in order to appear 'thinner', all cause us to breathe using our chests only. When we are stressed, we get muscular tension in many areas of our bodies; our shoulders subconsciously lift in a primitive attempt to protect our necks, our most vulnerable area, from attack. This tension reduces our ability to breathe correctly. Our bodies go into a 'fight or flight response', releasing stress hormones into the body to prepare ourselves for action. Our digestive and immune systems slow down, sending blood to the brain and muscles. If we are always stressed, the body may suffer harmful effects. Abdominal breathing helps us to relax, reducing physical tension and stress levels and allows our body's systems to function correctly.

Abdominal breathing allows the abdomen to expand in all four directions. If abdominal breathing is practiced regularly then breathing will be naturally slow and deep.

Our nervous systems are also affected by how we breathe, during different activities our brainwave patterns change. Chest breathing creates shorter, faster brainwaves called Beta waves. These are emitted when we are awake/during normal consciousness, concentration, active conversation or if we are feeling tense, whilst abdominal breathing creates longer and slower brainwaves called Alpha, similar to the brainwaves emitted during physical or mental relaxation with an awareness of what is happening around us, as when in meditation or when doing Tai Chi Qigong, so have a calming effect.

In Tai Chi Qigong, we coordinate our breath and movements, allowing the breath to continually flow in and out smoothly, with no holding. Each movement has a Yin Yang aspect to it, moving from Yin to Yang or Yang to Yin. (Yin contains Yang and Yang contains Yin).

The in breath is Yin, the out breath is Yang. Generally, Yin movements tend to move upward and are performed on the inhale, whilst Yang is downward and performed on the exhale. An example of Yin Yang in Tai Chi Qigong movements are Playing with Waves, pushing forward and breathing out is Yang and drawing the arms back and breathing in is Yin. Another example is Twisting and Pushing Palms, turning the waist and pushing forward with the palm on the exhale is Yang, the palm turns over and pulls back again on an inhale, and this is Yin.

Abdominal breathing and Yi (intent) helps the flow of Qi. Qi is energy or life force, a universal enlivening energy found in everything. Abdominal breathing allows us to draw or 'sink' Qi to the lower dantein (The Sea of Qi), situated just below the navel, for storage, cultivation and development.