

by adam hsu

## Just Breathe Naturally

Photo by Marie Anthony

**"H**ow should I breathe when I practice *tai chi*?"

Do you know how many times people have asked me that question? A lot.

It is a popular topic. That is why videos, books, seminars and magazine columns have been devoted to it.

Anyway, what's my reply?

"Just breathe naturally."

Does my answer surprise you?

The following information may help explain my position.

### It's Not That Simple

First, breathing exercises not only enhance your well-being, they are an important element in many physical and spiritual disciplines.

Second, in northern styles of kung fu, we do not introduce students to internal training right away. Only after students have reached a certain level of foundation, precision and fluency do we feel they are ready to begin their internal development.

Third, breathing can be coordinated with movements. For example, attacking techniques are performed while you exhale. When you execute defensive movements that redirect your opponent's force, you inhale.

### The Arts Must Prepare Us

Have you ever noticed how easily our daily activities fall into a regularly rhythm and



routine? Similarly, there's a tempo to our normal breathing. It's a continuous, unconscious cycle of inhaling and exhaling.

We do not, however, have this luxury in combat. Combat disrupts breathing rhythm and tempo.

**T**he martial arts are not like dance, gymnastics or exercise. Therefore, martial arts training must prepare us to deal with the unexpected. Combat is filled with unpredictability. When will the enemy attack? From which direction?

The martial artist must have the ability to respond instantly and appropriately to surprise attacks, regardless of where he is, what posture he's in or how he is breathing.

### You Must Develop ...

Martial artists must also develop the ability to make sudden changes in breathing.

How?

Hold your breath for an instant, breaking your normal rhythm. Then you can adjust

your breathing to support an appropriate attacking or defending action.

You also have to learn how to execute a series of inhales and/or exhales. For instance, in combat you might need to inhale three consecutive times or exhale two consecutive times. Breathing begins with the basics, but you have to develop the ability to issue power at any time, exhaling or inhaling.

If you're exercising strictly for health, you won't need to worry about these higher breathing requirements.

If you're delving headfirst into *tai chi*, however, it's a must. You just never know when you'll be required to do what.

### Abundant Rewards

Ambitious students who set lofty goals devote a great deal of time and effort learning to develop and control their body and their breathing. And the rewards are many.

So what is the most fitting way to breathe while practicing *tai chi*?

Just breathe naturally! Of course!

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*About the author: Adam Hsu is the founder of the Traditional Wushu Association, which is based in Cupertino, California. He teaches traditional kung fu classes and workshops and has a line of videotapes.*