



Linda's T'a Chi Weekly Handout September 6, 2020

### Breathing



The sea women of Japan's Shima Peninsula maintain an ancient tradition of diving for pearls, urchins, and abalone all without the help of modern breathing devices. For over 2000 years, the Ama-San (sea women) have been diving in this way. **Ama** (Japanese: 海女, "sea women") are also known as **uminchu** (in Okinawan) or **kaito** (in the Izu Peninsula). The vast majority of *ama* are women.

Women begin diving as ama as early as 12 and 13 years old, taught by elder ama. Despite their early start, divers are known to be active well into their 70s and are rumored to live longer due to their diving training and disciplines. In Japan, women are considered to be superior divers due to the distribution of their fat and their ability to hold their breath.<sup>[5]</sup> As described above, the garment of the ama have changed throughout time from the original loincloth to white sheer garb and eventually to the modern diving wetsuit. The world of the ama is one marked by duty and superstition. One traditional article of clothing that has stood the test of time is their

headscarves. The headscarves are adorned with symbols such as the *seiman* (star) or the *douman* (cross hatch) which have the function of bringing luck to the diver and warding off evil. The ama –san are also known to create small shrines near their diving location where they will visit after diving in order to thank the gods for their safe return. It is the belief of the ama-san that women are sent to protect and care for the oceans and the creatures. They enter the water with respect and love.

The ama – san are considered the first free divers with the ability to free dive to depths of 30 feet and holding their breaths 2 minutes.

“Free divers rely on the mammalian dive reflex. The diving reflex is a physiological adaptation found in marine mammals and also in humans. Trying to hold your breath on land or in a pool doesn't compare to freediving since neither are likely to trigger your body's dive reflex. In short, the dive reflex lowers your heart rate and diverts blood flow from the extremities to your heart, lungs and brain. The dive reflex allows a diver to remain underwater longer since their body's demand for oxygen is greatly diminished.” (NCBI Diving reflex)

The story of the Ama is important to highlight that we have lots of breath and we can control our breathing, not to the free dive capability but lots of breath for our health. This is essential in performing T'ai Chi. In the book “Breathing” by James Nestor, “to breathe is to absorb ourselves in what surrounds us , to take in little bits of life, understand them and pieces of ourselves back out. Respiration is, at its core, reciprocation.” In the T'ai Chi literature, “when the breath is perfect, the form is perfect.” Our main goal in T'ai Chi is to bring ourselves back to center, to balance, and T'ai Chi breathing can get us there. We begin the form in a certain state such as tired, agitated, or anxious and change our state to something more pleasant simply by doing the form and breathing deeply and slowly.

There are a few concepts I focus on in breathing:

1. The first, breathe through the nose and not the mouth
2. The second breathe deeply and use the diaphragm to create space in the upper cavity.
3. And finally, inhale slowly and exhale twice as slowly as the inhale.

Nose breathing is the correct way to breath and there are many advantages of nose breathing:

- The nose acts as a filter and retains small particles in the air, including pollen.
- The nose adds moisture to the air to prevent dryness in the lungs and bronchial tubes.
- The nose warms up cold air to body temperature before it gets to your lungs.
- Nose breathing adds resistance to the air stream. This increases oxygen uptake by maintaining the lungs' elasticity.

Mouth breathing is not healthy and may result in low oxygen in the blood. A Chinese Taoist text from the eighth century AD noted the nose was the “heavenly door” and that breath must be taken in through it. “Never do otherwise,’ the text warned for breath would be in danger and illness would set in.” The breath inhaled through the mouth is called “Ni Ch'i” or adverse breath which is extremely harmful, states a passage from the book of poetry, Tao. “Be careful not to have the breath inhaled through the mouth.” (Breathing, James Nestor)

Native Americans attribute vigorous health to a medicine called “a great secret of life.” That secret? Breathing.

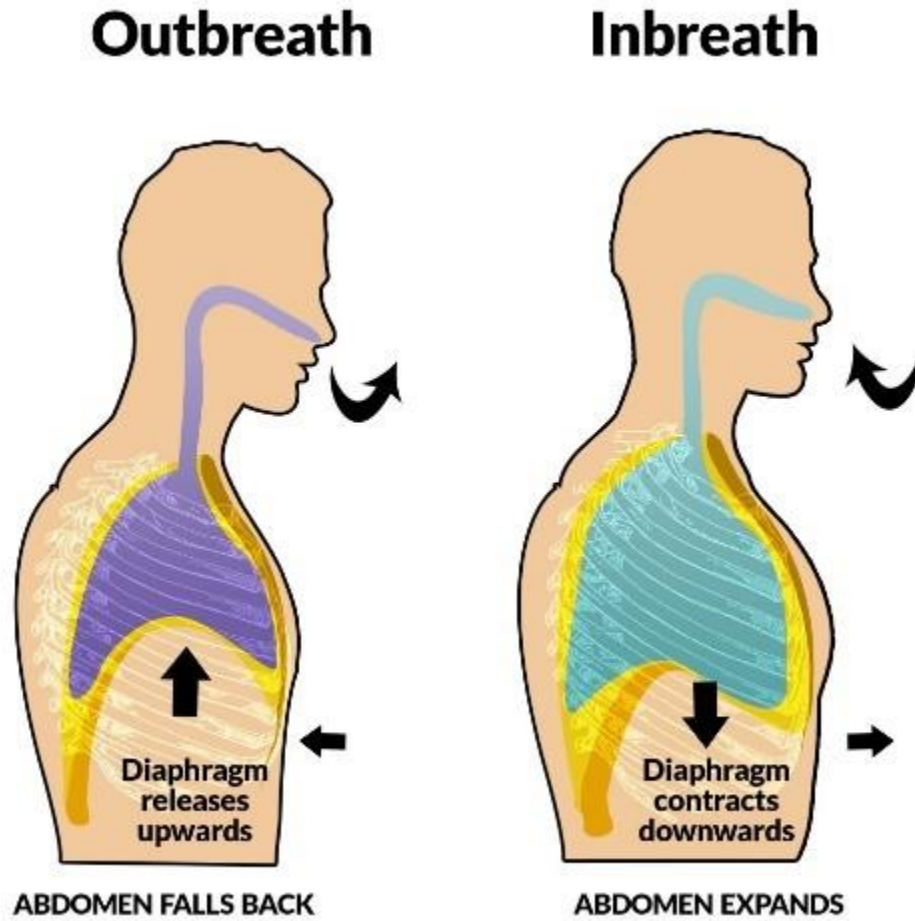
T'ai Chi is beneficial for those of us who breathe through our mouths perhaps as a habit, chronic nasal problems or possibly stress. But, T'ai Chi with a focus on slow deep breaths is healing because it is designed to activate the parasympathetic nervous system and promote slower deep breathing through the nose.

Here are some breathing tips as you perform T'ai Chi and for you breathing

1. Breathe out long enough so that you feel like you need to take a deep breath.
2. Your exhale should be slightly longer than your inhale.
3. Keep your tongue on the roof of your mouth. Say “la” and notice where the tongue goes. Place the tip of the tongue here when practicing tai chi.
4. Primarily inhale and exhale through your nose. Use mouth breathing only if you're suffering from allergies, colds, or other types of nasal congestion.
5. Aim for a long, continuous breath without a pause between the inhale and exhale. Breathing should not stop.
6. Breathe into the belly. The changing pressure on your organs while you breathe gives them a massage.
7. When you're inhaling (storing energy), think of taking in the life energy-oxygen- into your body. When you deliver energy or force, you exhale.
8. When your hands move apart breathe in, you are storing energy. When your hands come together you are delivering energy so breathe out.
9. When your hands move up, breathe in, you are storing energy. When your hands move down, breathe out, you are delivering energy again.

Over-concentrating on breathing can have detrimental effects. It can cause undue stress. So, start learning to breathe through your nose, slowly and deeply. You will get better with practice.

The following diagram illustrates the movement of the diaphragm. As you breathe in, the diaphragm lowers and the belly pushes outward, creating a larger cavity for your breath, and as you breathe out, the diaphragm returns to its natural position. We want to avoid short shallow breaths with the lungs.



In closing, as you perform your T'ai Chi, relax, be soft, light and bouyant and breathe deeply and slowly,

I do hope you enjoy this painting of the Ama or sea women of Japan.

Peace and Health,

Linda

