

# Breathing Without Breathing

by

Master Jou, Tsung-Hwa

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The phrase, “breathing without breathing” [wuxi zhixi] appears in several old Taoist writings, particularly those pertaining to qigong, martial arts, and meditation. From a modern and western viewpoint however, this phrase seems like total nonsense: after all, either you breathe or you don’t! To better understand the old eastern philosophical meaning of this phrase, let us explore a more mundane analogy: “money without money.”

This phrase also seems like nonsense. What is “money without money?” How about a check! When we use a check we write an amount, to whom it goes, and our signature on a slip of paper, and without having to actually hand over anything of real value we can purchase something worth thousands of dollars. This is such a routine part of our everyday life that we don’t even think about it. We know that if we have money in the bank we have the power to write checks and do not have to carry a lot of cash around with us. But what would happen if we could go back in time before the concept of “check” existed? The people of that era would laugh at us if we told them that relatively worthless pieces of paper could be used to buy things. In a society without banks, credit, or installment payments, goods of equal value would have to be exchanged on the spot, regardless of the difficulties and risks involved in transporting them. To the people in such a society, checks would seem strange and incomprehensible. To us, it is commonplace to offer and to accept something as abstract as a check for concrete goods, services, or cash. If a paradox like “money without money” is possible, we may believe that “breathing without breathing” is also possible.

We can also use the analogy of how one learns to sing to explain how the concrete act of breathing can be transformed to a more abstract and advanced level. When one first learns to sing, one concentrates on the requirements of the mouth: how to shape the mouth properly, where to place the tongue, etc. When students begin more advanced training, however, they are taught how to use their throat: how to pass the air through the vocal chords, how to increase their range of pitch, how to produce vibrato sounds, etc. As they progress, use of the mouth becomes secondary—more natural and effortless—and use of the throat becomes more important.

Most of us would never even think about seeking formal training in how to breathe. We unconsciously adjust the amount of air we inhale and exhale [through] our nose and mouth according to the need of our body from moment to moment. Even those who conduct breath training may simply discuss different requirements about how long, deep, and thin our breathing should be, or how and when to inhale/exhale, etc. But this is all just kindergarten—the same as

learning to sing a song from the mouth, or buying something with coins from our first allowance. There are much more advanced levels to aspire to, once we have understood the basics. Just as a more advanced level of singing shifts the focus from the mouth to the throat, and opening our first bank account shifts our focus from our pockets to our checkbook, a more advanced level of breathing shifts the focus from the breath to the movement of the abdomen.

To learn “breathing without breathing,” concern yourself only with the continuous contraction and expansion of the abdomen (dantian). If you truly have all your mind on the movement of the abdomen, you will forget your breathing and it will happen naturally. You may ask, “But when should I inhale and when should I exhale during the abdominal movement?” The answer is actually simple. Think about what happens to the mouth when one sings from the throat: nature starts to take its course with what happens to the mouth. When the focus is on singing from the throat, the mouth functions more effortlessly. The same idea applies to your breath. If you want to inhale when you pull the abdomen in, then inhale—if you want to exhale, then exhale! Don’t focus on it. This is the path to “breathing without breathing.”

There has always been a lot of argument concerning the concept of pre-birth and post-birth breathing. If people are troubled by this question, it is because they are still focusing on the nose, mouth, and lungs instead of on the abdomen. This is like discussing the requirements of the mouth for singing a song. The pre-birth/post-birth problem also plagued me at one time. When I paid attention to the inhalation and exhalation of breath, there were still times I found myself short of breath. Once I started focusing only on the movement of the abdomen and letting the inhaling and exhaling occur naturally, I was not short of breath anymore, even during physical chores or fajing exercises.

Assiduous study and practice of “breathing without breathing” has also led me into a more complete realization of the significance of pre-birth breathing. Pre-birth breathing is at first an imitation of the exchange of nutrients and waste between a fetus and its mother. This process, facilitated by the umbilical cord connected to the abdomen of the fetus, is conceptualized as a kind of “breathing.” If the fetus were in control of this process, it would draw in its abdomen to “inhale” oxygen and nourishment, and force out or “exhale” metabolic wastes by expanding its abdomen. Consequently, the practice of pre-birth breathing involves alternately drawing in and expanding the lower abdomen.

The second characteristic of pre-birth breathing is that as the fetus draws energy into its abdominal area, energy is also distributed to all parts of its body; when waste is eliminated from its abdominal area, waste is drawn toward the abdomen from all parts of its body. So when we pull in the abdomen in “breathing without breathing,” we must open all parts of the body in succession to send the qi throughout the body; when we expand the abdomen, we must close all parts of our body in reverse succession, completing the cycle. In this way, the effect of pre-birth breathing spreads throughout the entire body.

This may seem difficult or esoteric, but it is not. This is how all of us breathed before we were born, and in infancy our practice of this natural instinct faded away and was forgotten. Yet although it is true we are no longer in our mother's womb, we are still growing and developing within the womb of the Great Mother. We receive food, oxygen, and sunlight from the environment, transform it within our bodies, and send the metabolic wastes back to the environment to be transformed again. When contracting and expanding the abdomen is integrally connected to the sensation of opening and closing all parts of the body, we may begin to exchange energy with nature consciously, and gain control over our physical and mental functions.

The ability to use this advanced breathing lies within each and everyone of us. No complicated books or great teachers are needed. But merely discussing it will accomplish nothing. Instead, reflect back to what you must have been like when you were a fetus, as your meridians and organs were being formed and before they became blocked and weakened through anxiety, habit, deficiency and excess. Taoist philosophy is easy to understand, but very difficult to apply. To solve this mystery of nature you must reflect deeply, open your sensibilities, and practice diligently. Be patient and persistent. If you are sincere, one day you will re-discover in every breath the immense power now dormant within you.

[For further information, see: Jou, *The Dao of Taijiquan: Way to Rejuvenation*, 7th printing, May 1998, pp. 137-142.]

