April Principle Qigong Focus: Minding the Breath

This is the third Qigong Principle in our year long, exploration of self through each of 8 Qigong Principles. We will share perspective on all three layers, physical, mental and emotional. The level at which you participate is always up to you.

Qigong Principle 3 - Minding the Breath
The practice of mindfully optimizing the physical activity of breathing, becoming fully present within each moment in a way that relaxes your body, settles your mind and eases your heart.

Physical Level Goal: Understand the importance and value of maintaining a full, relaxed breath.
Yes, we all breathe, but how well do we breathe? Do you find your breathing pattern to be shallow and tight, full and relaxed or somewhere in between? Because the breath is an autonomic (automatic) process, we rarely pay attention to it which leads to many of us having irregular, shallow and interrupted breathing patterns. By consciously optimizing our breathing patterns, we begin to take control of our health on physical, mental and emotional levels. Mindful breath training can improve lung performance, increase oxygen uptake and release hormones which relax muscles and dilate blood vessels, leading to increased blood flow and improved lymph circulation.

Mental Level Goal: Recognize and understand how mental disruptions can affect the quality of our breathing pattern.
What happens when we concentrate intensely, fight heavy traffic or a watch a suspenseful movie? We have a tendency to hold or interrupt our natural breathing pattern. This happens because our sympathetic (fight, flight or freeze) response is motivated by our logic, left brain and our breath is driven more by the parasympathetic (rest, digest and heal), feeling, right brain. This is also why racing thoughts can create a shallow, tight, irregular breathing pattern. Just as the mind can disrupt the breath, actively working with the breath can help settle the mind. One of the fundamental anchors in the TMQP Program is using the breath to control body movement. Breath first, movement second.

Emotional Level Goal: Recognize and understand how your breath is affected when your emotions become out of balance or overwhelming.
Just as the mind can overwhelm the breath, so too can our emotions. When we are scared or worried, we have a tendency to hold our breath. The terror we feel during a panic attack certainly causes a powerful interruption of the normal breathing pattern, as does anger with its typically heavy, labored breath pattern. Taking control of your breath can be a very powerful tool to help settle an emotional upheaval. Deep breathing will not make the emotion go away, nor should it. What it will do is move you toward the Eye of the Hurricane where you can be more clear about the base emotion you are feeling. Specifically, when we experience an emotion such as fear, there is the base emotional response and then, our mind begins to conjure possibilities which can lead to mental overwhelm such as racing thoughts, anxiety or worry. As an example, because of a recent automobile accident, one person may find ways to avoid driving, or feel fear at the thought of driving again. Another person might use the experience, of a previous accident, to make them more aware of traffic patterns helping them feel safer while driving. Both drivers are afraid but each is using a different filter to interpret and manage the emotion. One feels overwhelmed by the thought of another accident, while the other feels empowered to improved their driving skills. Which person do you think is breathing better?
Training Cautions Reminder:
Throughout the year the Qigong practices we share will become progressively more challenging. With this in mind, it is important that each of us work within comfortable limits. There are three layers of attention we ask you to keep in mind for all manners of physical training; strength, flexibility and pain. Please do not push past what your body is willing to do, today. Learning to respect boundaries, is a vital part of our journey together.

Basic Respiratory Anatomy:
Your lungs are basically two sacks of spongy tissue contained within a sealed chest cavity which expand vertically from the collar bone down toward the naval, much more than horizontally against the rib cage. Attached to the bottom of the rib cage is a large, flat muscle called the thoracic diaphragm which flexes up and down to change the size (volume) of the chest cavity. To create an inhale, the diaphragm pushes down toward the abdomen creating more volume (space) in the chest cavity, allowing a vacuum to be created around the lungs. This vacuum is brought back into balance by taking air into the lungs via the trachea, creating an inhale. When the diaphragm contracts, pushing up, the chest cavity experiences an increase in pressure around the lungs which forces air out the trachea creating an exhale. When we experience hiccups, the diaphragm is simply convulsing (flexing) to force air in. A good, lung clearing cough also originates at the diaphragm.

Exercise - Abdominal Breathing
We are born abdominal breathers and typically lose this natural breath pattern around the age of 6 or 7. It is likely that the increased mental and emotional activity levels introduced by school and related social pressures contribute to this shift toward chest-breathing. Poor sitting or standing posture can also create a shallow breathing pattern as can tension, anxiety and fear. The most efficient breathing technique is called Dan Tien or Abdominal Breathing which takes half the energy and typically increases our oxygen transfer efficiency by up to 30 percent.

Dan Tien Breathing is a slow, deep breathing style that coordinates your breath with the movement of your diaphragm and abdominal muscles. Breathing from the nose with the mouth closed is ideal for managing a slow, gentle breath, however, it is not necessary in order to obtain benefit from this training. In addition, proper posture also plays an important role in maximizing the efficiency of this breathing pattern. Draw your chin in toward the spine and stand (or sit) tall. A crouched posture blocks free movement of the diaphragm and thus restricts the volume of each breath. As you inhale, allow your lower abdomen to expand and relax in a downward flow effectively pressing against your waistline. This wall muscle release will offer more room for the internal organs allowing them to adjust and move, as the diaphragm drops lower and gives the lungs more room to take in a fuller breath.

As you exhale, let your abdominal muscles gently contract to effectively “squeeze” the abdomen, pushing the diaphragm and lungs in an upward direction, thus expelling more of the used air in preparation for the next inhale cycle. Allow your breathing pattern to move at a steady, relaxed pace. There should be no force used during this exercise.

NOTE: For some people, abdominal breathing may feel counter intuitive. This is especially true for those that were taught to suck in their stomach. In order for one to have a full inhale, the diaphragm pushing down has to displace the abdominal organs a bit. This displacement gives the impression of the lower belly expanding outward. The easiest way to practice this technique is while lying down so that the wall muscles can relax. Practicing while in bed can be an effective way to send yourself into a deep, restful sleep. As you get comfortable with Dan Tien Breathing, try adding it to your standing Qigong practice.