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BREATH CONTROL

SECRET TO LIFE

by Alexander S. Holub

Of all human survival drives, the most urgent is the need for air. We can go for weeks without food or water, it may take a similar amount of time to be affected by the elements, and it will generally take some days before lack of sleep radically affects our existence. But without air we can only live for a few minutes. Consequently, it can be called the most essential element for human survival.

On the average, an individual will take about 21,800 breaths in a 24-hour period. Fifteen breaths per minute, or one every four seconds.

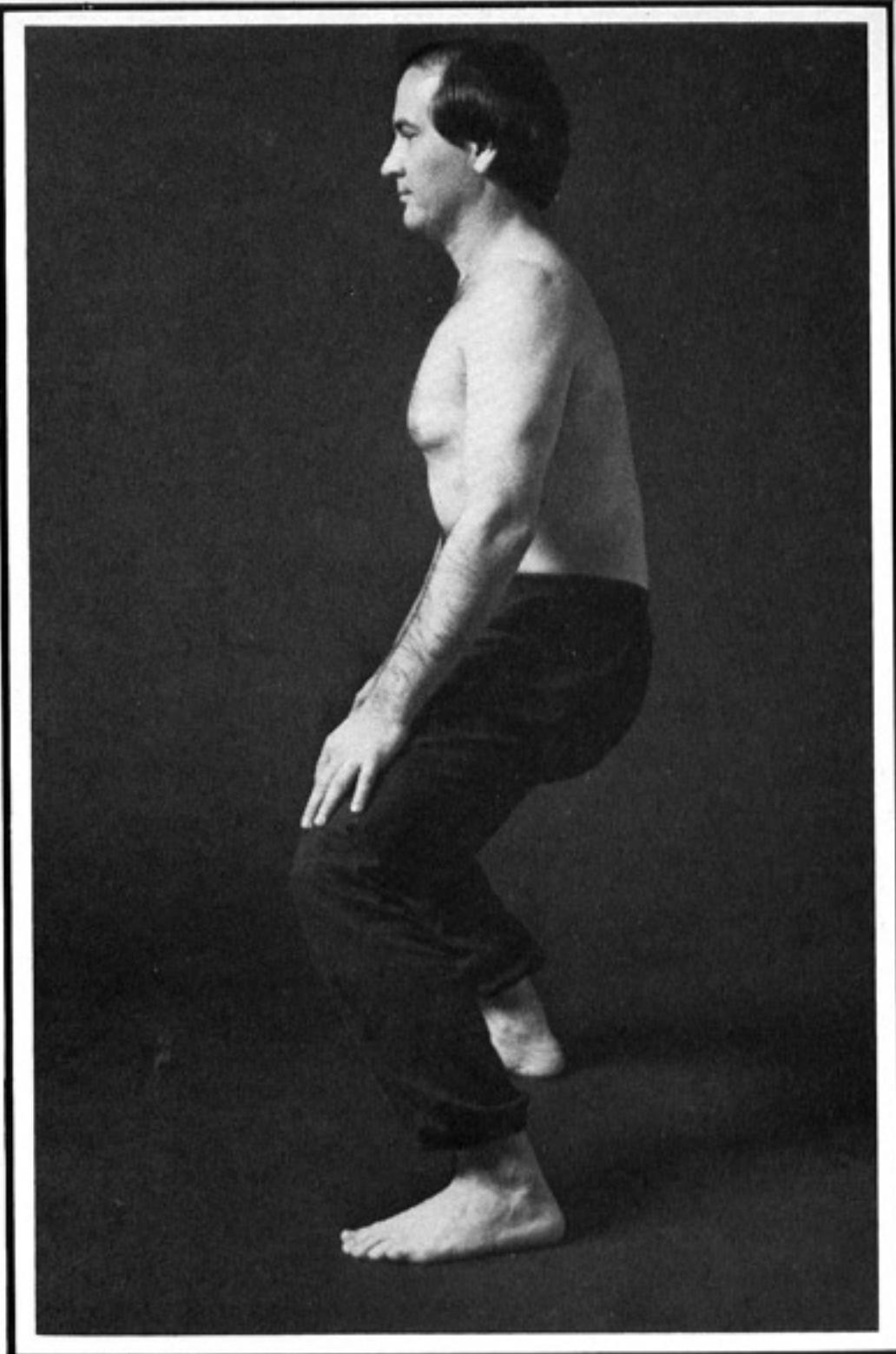
There are many who believe that life expectancy is linked to the frequency of breathing. All one need do, these theorists of China, Japan and India assert, is look at the animals which breathe very slowly (such as the turtle) and one cannot help but see that it is these slow-breathing animals which live the longest. So, by this reverse reasoning, an intentional decrease in the frequency of one's breath is thought to increase the "life energy" (chi, ki or prana in the various cultures) of the human body and prolong life. In fact, it has been said that the body of a person practicing breath control and breath regulation will become harmoniously developed, emit a sweet scent and become strong and beautiful. There are even those who believe that conscious breath control makes one the master of his own destiny by burning away "karma."

According to the classical theory, when we as human beings are first born and begin to breathe we breathe naturally and correctly. If you watch an infant lying on its back breathing, you will note that the child's abdomen extends and contracts with each breath. It's normal, natural and easy to breathe this way.

Unfortunately, most of us in the West are *taught* to breathe incorrectly. We're taught that a breath is to be taken by extending the chest. This is wrong. It makes for a stiff, hard, abnormal and unhealthy breath.

The natural breath *fills* the whole lung. The unnatural breath fills only the upper part. The natural breath is supple and gentle and regulates and controls the life's energies. It cleanses and energizes the body. The breathing we Westerners learn is not designed for this. The *Tao Te Ching* (the classic of Chinese Taoism) says:

*A man is born gentle and weak.
At death he is hard and stiff.
Green plants are tender and filled with sap.
At death they are withered and dry.
Therefore, the stiff and unbending is the disciple of death.
The gentle and yielding is the disciple of life.*



The spine must be straight for proper breathing as it helps get the breath to the diaphragm.

Consider this: When an individual is found to have lung cancer, the X-ray will show an accumulation of mass in the lung, usually mainly at the bottom of the lungs. If the cancer was caused by smoking, the mass at the bottom of the lungs is often simply the tar and nicotine from cigarettes. To the Chinese way of thinking, smoking is detrimental not only due to these tars and nictines, however, but due to a weakening of the lungs themselves. Smoking forces the individual to breathe harder and harder to achieve the same result, while breathing incorrectly does not allow full use of the diaphragm. The individual breathes with only the *upper* portion of the lungs. All the tars and nictines are then filtering downward, to the bottom of the lungs, and accumulating in a mass which irritates the sensitive lung tissue.

Now, smoking is a bad habit anyway. It can cause other problems such as heart trouble, which is also breath-related. Beginning to breathe correctly and continuing to smoke will not correct any present or future problems. But proper breathing and full use of the diaphragm will help keep the respiratory system clear and help both your endurance and your power in the martial arts.

One of the forgotten aspects of martial arts training in many schools is the control of the breath. And, according to traditional thought, by proper control of the breath one can control the flow of the internal energies.

In the martial arts there are three methods which are mainly used to gain control over the breath. The first is meditation.

In meditation, the mind is taught to be still, and the body is taught to relax. Thus, the chi is contacted and manipulated throughout the system. Visualization, mantras, and other conscious exercises are also employed during meditation for breath manipulation.

The second method is breathing exercises themselves. Here a variety of methods can help. Some make use of slow, relaxed motion while others use dynamic tension, but both methods can build up the body at the same time one is learning to manipulate the body's chi.

The third method is through martial arts forms, or *kata*. This method is very often overlooked, but the traditional forms contain all necessary ingredients for gaining control over and releasing the human being's internal energies. Ideally, when practiced correctly, martial arts forms represent a combination of *both* the other main systems of breath control. In many instances, though, forms are either set aside in favor of fighting and sparring only, or they are taught more or less as a formal adjunct to the class, simply because they have to be learned in order to go up for the belts.

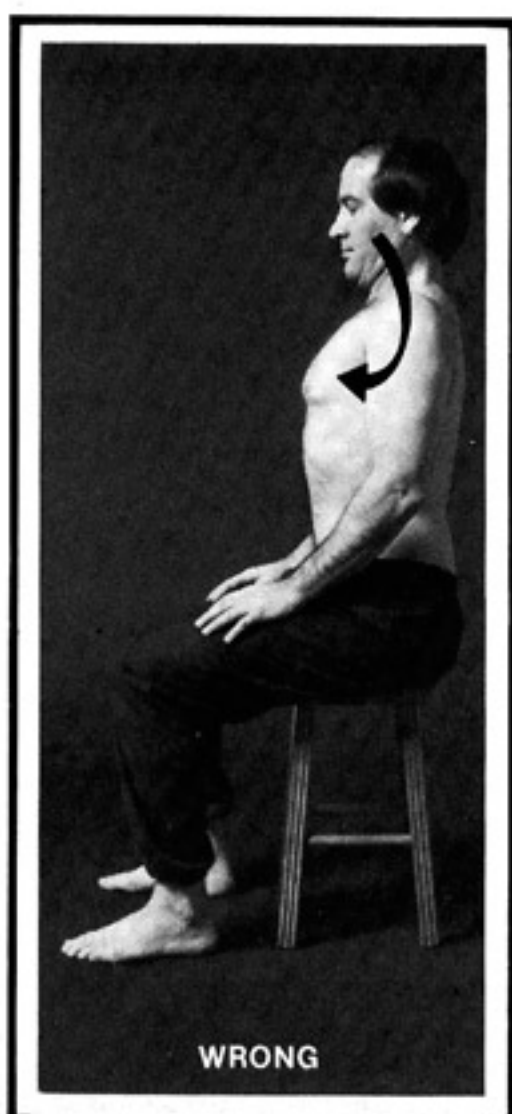
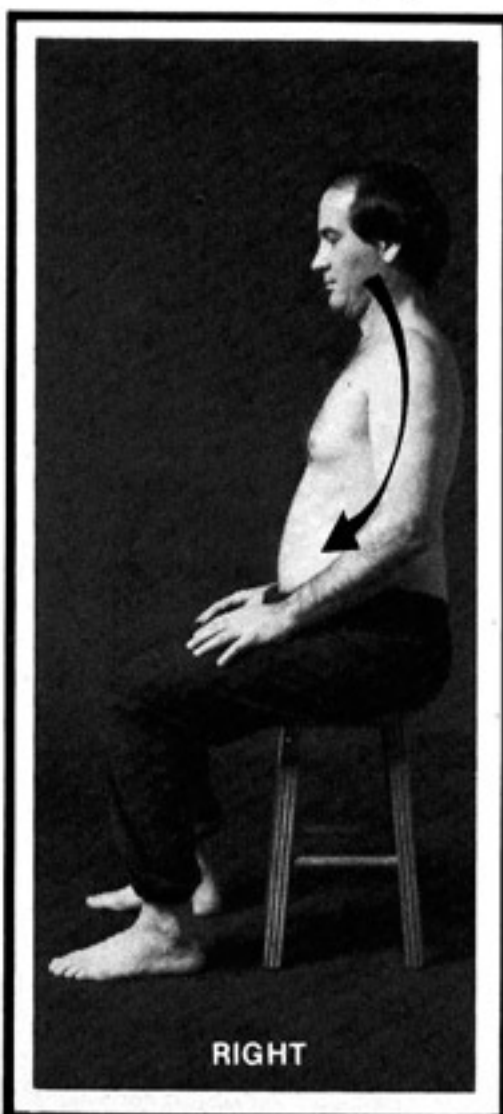
By now, quite probably, you've been made a bit more aware of your own breathing. In fact, the chances are you're watching the rise and fall of your chest.

Well, here's a simple exercise to check the placement of your breath.

Without changing your normal breathing pattern, place one hand on the center of your abdomen just below the solar plexus. See if your breath reaches that far, which you can tell by the rise and fall of your abdominal muscles. The abdomen should noticeably extend on the inhalation and contract on the exhalation. If the *opposite* is occurring, you're breathing with your chest and not the diaphragm.

If you're like most Americans, there's a good chance you were doing it wrong. But don't worry, correcting this isn't that difficult. Some good methods of correction, in fact, are directly out of the "Bel Canta" system of classical voice training from the study of opera in Italy.

Rather than breathing only with the chest (wrong), incorporate the diaphragm as well (right).



First, lay flat on your back on the floor and relax. Place a rather heavy book directly on your abdomen and begin to breathe. You will notice that in this position the chest has a very difficult time controlling the breath. Consequently, the diaphragm must do more work. As the diaphragm begins to work more fully you will notice the book beginning to rise and fall with each breath.

There is also something else that you may not have noticed. This is simply that for your breathing to work properly, the spine must be straight. In meditation this is of utmost importance and so it is also in the martial arts.

The straight spine does several things. First, it helps to keep the chest up. With the chest up, breathing tends to be done with the diaphragm and not the chest.

Here's a little technique you can use to keep the spine straight while you're in your Chinese front horse stance. Back up to a pillar, a door jamb or a tall post of some sort. Get into your horse stance so that you will be standing perfectly balanced only a few inches in front of the object. Now lean back so that your spine touches. You will probably find that the upper part of your spine, around the shoulders, and the lowest part, around the coccyx bone, *are* all that touch. Now *straighten* the spine by pushing the groin area forward. It is important that you not push the hips, only the groin, and hold that position until you begin to feel the spine is totally straight.

You will notice that your breathing will almost immediately shift of its own accord from the chest to the diaphragm. Then you will notice also that the breath is deeper, seeming to penetrate down into the pelvic region. This is where you want the breath. The deeper the better.

After you have stood leaning against the object like this, get yourself into your more balanced front horse stance by leaning forward. It is important that you maintain the straight spine when you return to the front horse stance.

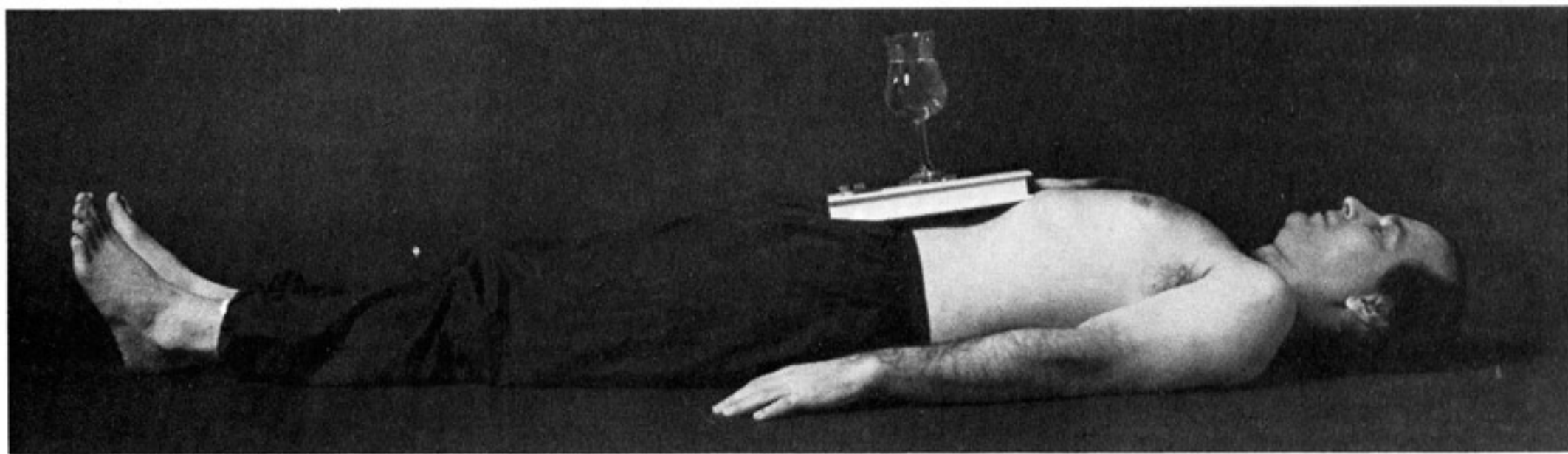
This simple method and the one previous to it from the Bel Canta system improve one's posture and breathing, strengthen the diaphragm, decrease one's breathing sequences and straighten out the spine, even of those typical Westerners who claim that they've got a "natural curve" in their spine. You will also notice that as long as you can keep your spine straight in performing a kata you'll have that much more endurance.

Next, it is important that you get back into the *habit* of using the diaphragm and only the diaphragm to breathe. Here we'll use a modification to the Bel Canta exercise.

Lying on your back on the floor again, take the book and place it on your abdomen. Extend your abdominal muscles outward as far as they can go and hold this position. From here, begin to breathe. If you want to make it a bit more difficult, place a glass of water on top of the book and hold it there and breathe.

This exercise not only brings the diaphragm more fully into each breath, but it will also dramatically strengthen the abdominal muscles. You will feel for yourself how the diaphragm is supposed to work.

It's an interesting side-note that male opera singers always wear a tight sash or cummerbund when singing. Contrary to popular belief, this has nothing to do with hiking up their pants, or even with keeping the shirt tucked in. It is worn this way in order to help the singer feel the abdominal muscles as they're working. You might try it yourself. Tie a tight sash around your abdomen as you stand in your front horse stance or as you do your forms. Remember that during the inhalation the abdomen is expanded, and is contracted during the exhalation.



These simple exercises should be done several times a day to get the maximum effect out of them. An adjunct to these exercises is the act of catching yourself whenever you think of it during the day and forcing yourself by an effort of conscious will to breathe properly. It will be worth it in the long run, and you will most likely notice much improvement in your endurance as the training begins to take effect.

Breaking the breathing motion into three parts for analysis, we find there are three parts of the breath: the inhalation, the retention and the exhalation.

The inhalation should always be natural, never forced. The air should flow naturally into the body as a result of the expansion of the abdominal muscles, not resulting from a gulping motion. After you have worked on breathing exercises for a while you'll comprehend more fully what this means.

The inhalation should always be according to the needs of the body. You will find, however, that with correct breathing these needs change. Your requirements for air will lessen. Those who breathe shallowly up high in the chest, breathe like a panting dog after a long chase. Their requirements for intake are greater, because less lung space is being used. You will also notice that with proper breathing the inhalation can actually be shorter but deeper.

(You might find it important to note that breathing through the nose does have a particular use here. As the breath comes in it is *warmed* by the tiny capillary blood vessels in the nasal passages, and foreign matter such as dust is cleared out due to the small hairs in the nose.)

The next portion of the breath is the retention. It is here that we can derive the greatest strength. This is the most important portion of the breath, for it is where the internal energies are built up for release in the exhalation.

In the Hindu yoga system of *pranayama* (breath control), stress is laid on retention of the breath. It is in the retention, the yogis insist, that the prana (chi or ki) is controlled. They believe that the breath is merely the gross external manifestation of the more subtle prana itself, and therefore that by exercising control over the breath one can control the prana inside. But the argument goes on from there. By having control of the prana, one also has control of the mind. It is prana which moves the mind and sets it in motion, and the Hindu monks feel it is the *vibrations* of prana that produce thought.

While practicing pranayama, or breath control, both the inhalation and the exhalation should always be slow and easy. The retention should in many instances be rather long. Many of the pranayama exercises continue on for about an hour or more at a time. During this time, a particular type of sweat associated with the flow of the prana,

or chi, can be noticed.

Here is an exercise that not only brings the flow of the chi and its accompanying sweat quickly, but also clears the mind to aid in better concentration. This exercise is from Tibet and has been called "pot-shaped breathing."

First of all, sit down in a chair with your feet flat on the floor and the palms of your hands resting on your thighs. Your spine must be straight and your head balanced and erect. Keep the chest up and breathe only with the diaphragm.

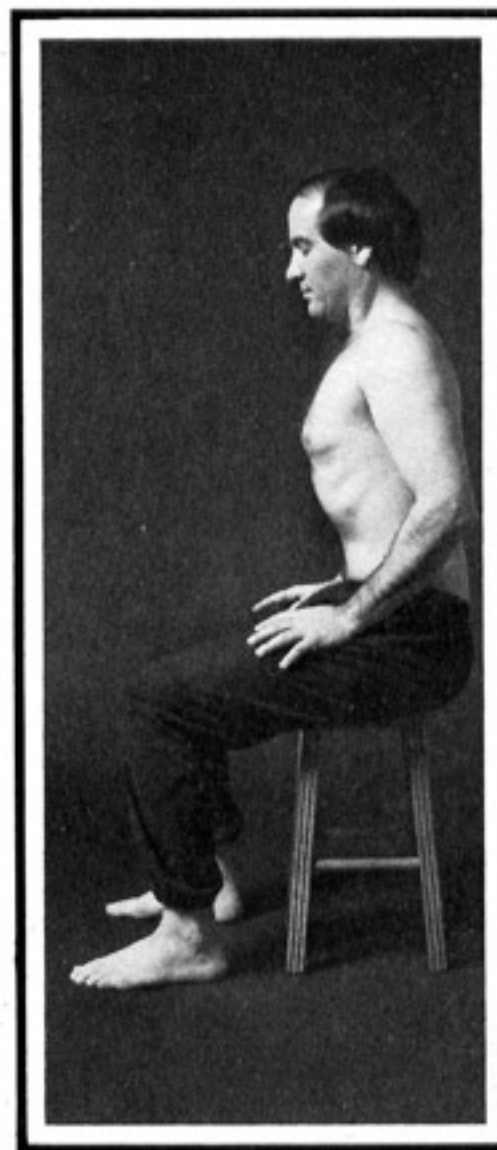
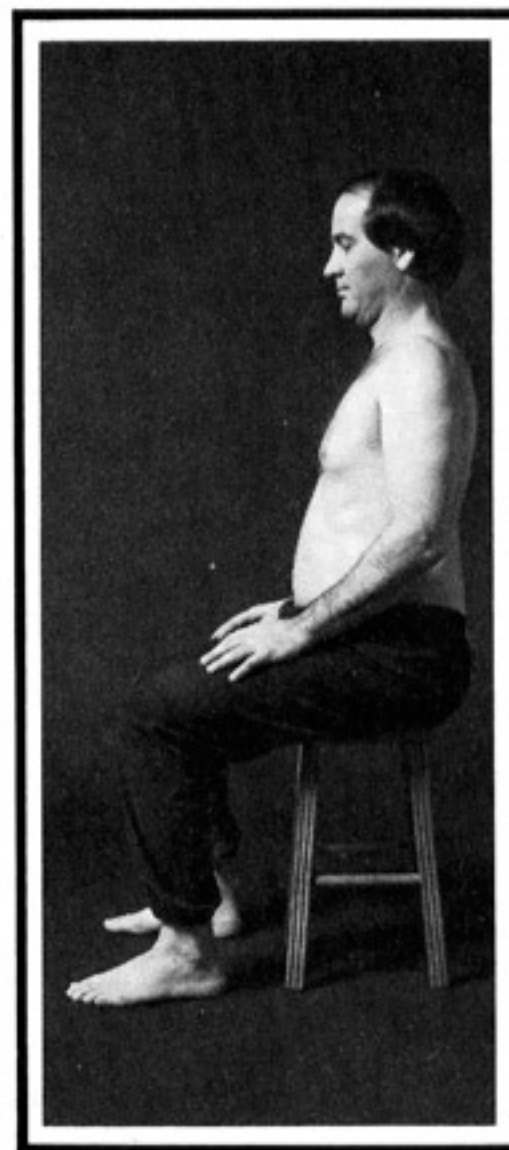
Next, close your eyes, relax and slowly breathe in as deeply as possible. The breath should extend the abdomen to its furthest point.

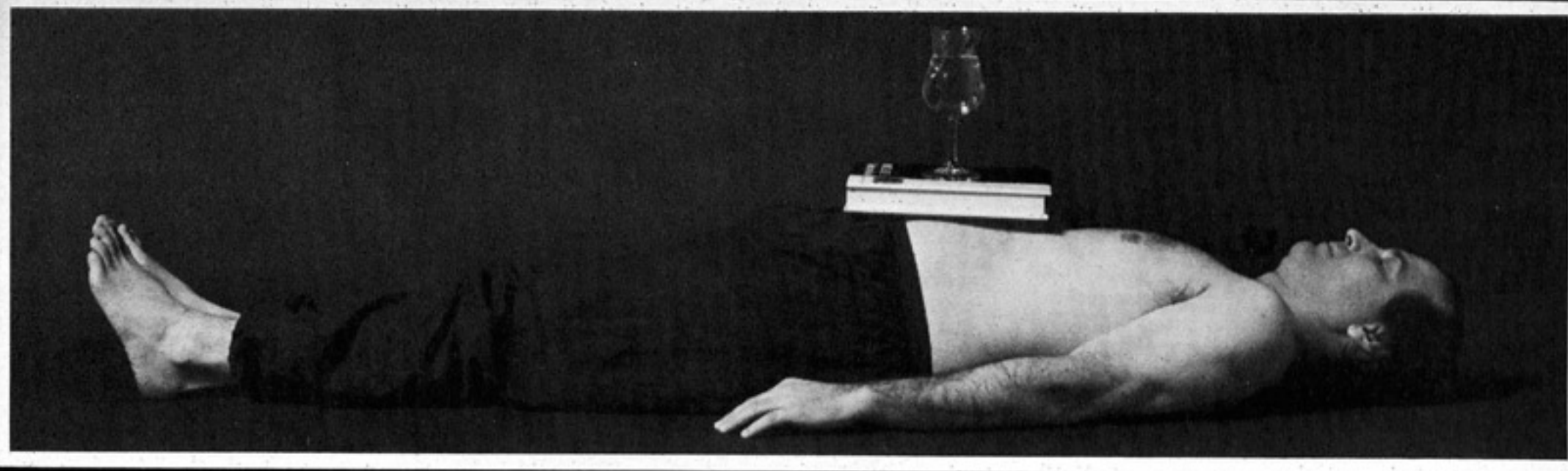
Retain the breath for a few moments and then slowly release it, forcing the air completely out of the lungs. Remove *all* the air from the lungs.

Do this—slow breath in, short retention and slow breath out, forcing all the air from the lungs—three times.

On the fourth round, after you have exhaled as before, *raise* the shoulders and force whatever air may be left in the lungs out, and then *drop* the shoulders. This should help expel any other remaining air. Then just sit there. For all intents and purposes the lungs are collapsed. Hold this posi-

Pot-shaped breathing not only brings chi flow, it also clears the mind for concentration.





In order to get into the habit of diaphragm breathing, try this exercise from the Bel Canta system.

tion as long as possible.

You will find that after such an exercise your head will be remarkably cleared; and you'll probably notice certain areas of your body, such as the palms of your hands, sweating. This is said to be caused by the flow of the chi, and the sweat is very similar to that produced by nervous tension, rather than by physical exertion. Please note that this exercise is not to be done over and over, but only when extreme concentration is needed or when concentration seems difficult.

Finally, the exhalation—the last portion of the breath. It is important, for it rids the body of wastes and surplus materials. In the martial arts the exhalation should be tied to an outward motion such as a punch or kick. And it is in the exhalation that the martial artist's internal energies are released.

Important here is also the fact that the exhalation should never be a forced breath, but just a natural consequence of the inhalation and retention during meditation and a natural consequence of the outward motion during a martial arts form.

In the form, or in the fighting situation, not all air should be expelled from the lungs. Remember, it is during *retention*

that the internal energies are built up for their release in the expiration of the breath and the outward movement.

When doing meditation, breath control exercises, martial arts forms or the internal exercises, visualization can be employed as well, in order to get much more out of each breath. During the inhalation, visualize yourself absorbing all the life-giving energies of the universe. You may see this as a stream of white light or sparkling bits of energy, or whatever you feel is appropriate. Remember to breathe in slowly.

On the retention, see these energies circulating throughout the body, revitalizing every atom of your being. Also, begin to see and feel the energies start to build up at the very tip of your spine, at the coccyx bone. After some weeks or months you should begin to feel the energies move slowly upward along your spine. With the spine straight there is no problem of these energies getting held up or caught anywhere. They will be free to move.

With exhalation, see all kinds of negativity, all physical problems and any accumulated tensions *leaving* the body and returning down into the earth, where they will be purified and recycled. You may see this as a dull muddy color, going right from your mouth to the earth, where it rises again as a white color.

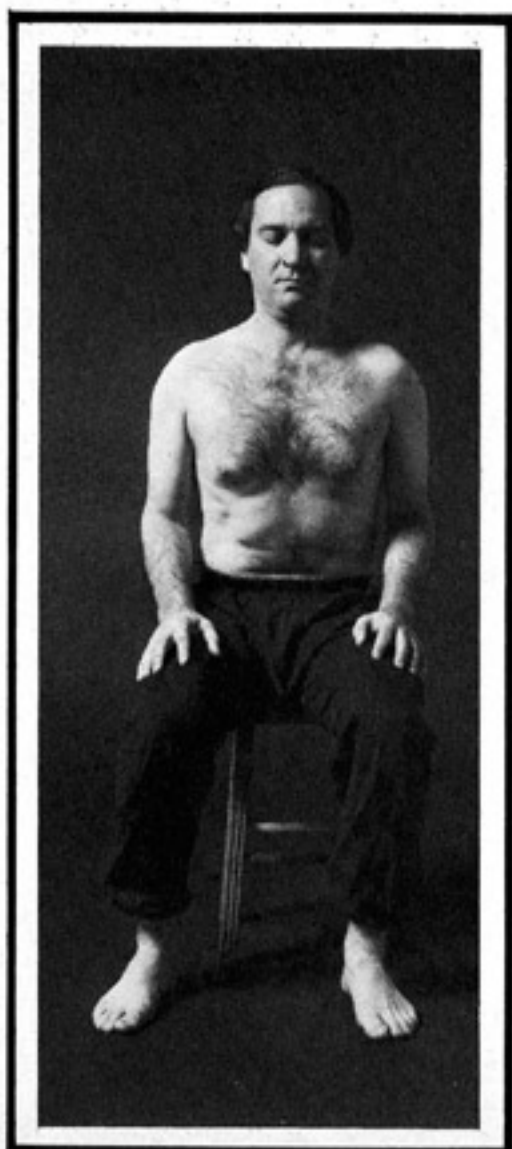
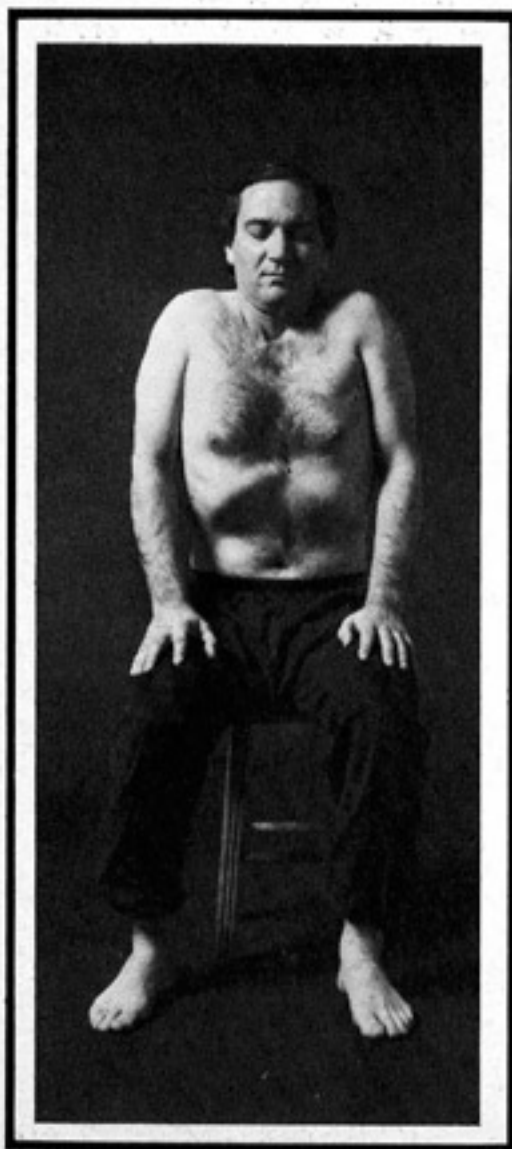
Now only one major step remains. Now that you've got the natural breathing motion and you can feel your breath and your energies likewise flowing, it becomes necessary to *lower* the breath.

Previously mentioned was the idea that the internal energies are to be built starting from the tip of the tailbone. In fact, you could even visualize these energies coming through the soles of your feet and beginning to mass at the coccyx bone. Since the energies and the breath are so closely tied together, let them work together.

In order to lower the breath your imagination must come into play again. "See" a tiny hole in the center of your diaphragm, and with each inhalation, see the breath go through that hole downward in a stream toward your pelvis. Little by little, increase the size of that hole until each breath seems to go straight into the pelvis and circulate from there.

It was mentioned earlier that not all of the breath should be released in a martial arts form when doing an outwardly directed movement. Well, it seems that about everyone will either hold his/her breath or release it all during such a movement. Here is an exercise, again from the Bel Canta system, that will help you to get a better understanding of how to regulate the breath.

Stand up straight and place your hands on your waist so that you can feel the muscles surrounding your abdomen.



BREATH CONTROL

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Take a deep breath and "lock it." (All you do when you *lock* the breath is tighten the abdominal muscles, not the chest and neck.) Press with the hands, to make sure the muscles are tight. Begin to let the air out in a very small amount, in a *hissing* sound, by pushing inward on the outer muscles and outward on the inner muscles. This exercise will not only develop better breath control but also strengthens the abdominal muscles on the sides, the front and back.

You will notice that in order to do this exercise effectively the spine must be straight and the hips must be pushed forward. The correct posture is of utmost importance in the control of breath and the regulation of chi. It is also important that you be comfortable. Until you get the correct posture and are comfortable in it, all your forms, breathing exercises and meditations will have a minimal effect.

After you have achieved the habits of correct posture and breathing you may be surprised to find yourself and some of your attitudes changing. Since the breath is the external manifestation of internal energies, when a regulated and correct habit of breathing is established the breath moves and changes. Consequently, as the body changes, so also do one's attitudes.

It is always good to get into a habit of regulated breath. Practice breathing according to a specific time or ratio. For example, there is the 1:4:2 breath, which is referred to as the "healing breath." In it the retention is four times as long as the inhalation and the exhalation is twice as long. The "four-fold breath" (4:4:4) has inhalation, retention and exhalation
