

just breath

In our intensely active and brain-driven culture we need to take a deep breath whenever the opportunity arises or whenever we feel constricted by stress



KURZFASSUNG

Der Artikel in 20 Sekunden

At the age of 47, the Chinese mathematics professor Jou Tsung Hwa had been stricken with intestinal and heart problems doctors found untreatable, giving him only a few months to live. Five years later, his physicians pronounced him in perfect health. He had learned to master the art of **Tai Chi**. Hwa believed that Evolution implants a self-destruct mechanism into the human organism so that one generation dies, and makes way for the next generation. The secret implant is the gradual restriction of breathing.

Longevity – not mere survival but healthy, vigorous old age – had been the goal of Chinese medicine for two thousand years. Along with kung-fu heroes and wandering monks, Chinese culture admired the elderly sages, and for centuries scholarly people devoted serious study to health in the later years of life. Health care aimed at radiant, vibrant, pain-free senior years. China cultivated longevity under the influence of Confucius's teachings, which became required exam material for government employees. Confucius taught respect for elders as well as for deceased ancestors. The elderly embody, for Confucius, the family's well-being and by extension the well-being of the entire nation. Supporting Confucian culture was the "radiant health" program of primeval Taoists like Lao-Tzu ("Old Sage") and Chuang-Tzu, who downplayed social conformity in favor of personal practices.

The ancient Chinese health-seekers were a far cry from our contemporary Extropians, who freeze human corpses for resurrection by future science. Although Taoists indeed used medieval alchemical language to describe the changes they induced in the aging body, they focused more on preventive health care than on manipulative physics. Many of their alchemical practices survive today in the routines of Tai Chi (Pinyin: taiji), Chi Kung (qigong), and Taoist meditation (neigong).

The Taoist longevity ideal was recently embodied by the Chinese-American Tai Chi master Jou Tsung Hwa (1917–1998) who, at 80 years of age, could easily pass for someone in his 40s: His eyes were bright and alert, his trim body moved gracefully with an upright carriage, and his gestures were smooth, graceful, and strong. Athletes who played martial arts with him said it was like "trying to hold a python." He surpassed in strength and agility nearly everyone who challenged him. Before arriving in New York in his 50s, Jou Tsung Hwa had been a widely acclaimed mathematics professor who had authored over 30 books, some of which were used as textbooks in schools throughout China. In 1964, at the age of 47, he had been stricken with intestinal and heart problems doctors found untreatable, giving him only a few months to live.

Finally at death's door, Jou was persuaded by a friend to begin learning Tai Chi. For a few minutes each day, he made slow but steady pro- ➤

gress until he found the strength to practice an hour a day. Five years later, his physicians pronounced him in perfect health and completely free of his stomach and heart ailments. Jou devoted the rest of his life to studying and spreading the art of Tai Chi that had saved his life.

In 1971, Jou Tsung Hwa moved to the United States. At Rutgers University in New Jersey, he studied mathematics and taught Tai Chi on the side. His classes grew to 300 students. When the academic departments failed to agree on where to fit his work in the academic “turf,” he realized he would need to write a textbook to explain to Western teachers what it was that he was teaching – was it philosophy or was it physical education? Although academia never “got it,” his text became the classic handbook for Tai Chi in English, *The Tao of Tai Chi Chuan*. Royalties from the book were applied to his long-time dream: To have a college where people could gather to study and share their ideas about the practice of Tai Chi. The dream eventually became “Tai Chi Farm,” an abandoned 100-acre farm in Warwick, New York, which became the scene of annual festivals to celebrate ancient meditative arts for health and longevity as well as a famous rural retreat for Tai Chi students. (see www.taichifarm.org)

One summer afternoon in 1997, a year before Jou was killed in a freak automobile accident, the 80-year-old master sat down outdoors at the Tai Chi Farm to explain to this interviewer the latest discoveries in his ongoing research on longevity. Sifting through obscure and difficult Chinese texts for decades, the Tai Chi grandmaster had discovered what he felt was an amazing truth which had remained hidden from him and from everyone else on the planet until now. This kind of shocking revelation of hidden secrets was what everyone had come to expect from Grandmaster Jou. This time, however, the ageing teacher had found the secrets of Nature that explained his own successful longevity: He wanted to convey, with characteristic intensity, Nature’s Big Secret. “Nature,” he explained, “has played a cunning trick on the human species.” The trick lies in how evolution achieves its goal: To eliminate one generation so as to make room for the next generation.

“Nature,” he explained, “is like the manufacturer of a radio or television or other electronic device who builds a computer chip inside the product that causes the device to obsolesce and fail to function over time.” The manufacturer – Nature in the case of human beings – needs the old device to fail so that there can be an upgrade to the next generation of devices. In this way, evolution forces fresh adaptation to ever-changing environments. (Jou Tsung Hwa also authored a book about the I Ching, the Book of Changes, the archaic visual logic of dynamic change. Many scholars believe it to be the oldest book on the planet.)

Evolution, in other words, implants a self-destruct mechanism into the human organism so that one generation wilts, dies, and makes way for the next generation. The secret implant – according to Grandmaster Jou’s discovery – is the gradual restriction of breathing. Pointing to his own throat, to the clavicular notch between the collarbones, he said: “As we grow older, our breath rises into the upper chest. Watch the belly of a baby. You will see the breath resides almost entirely in the lower belly when the baby breathes. Over time, breathing habits shift and the breath

jou devoted
the rest of
his life to
studying
and spread-
ing the art
of tai chi that
had saved
his life

Nature’s Big Secret:
To eliminate one
generation so as
to make room for
the next one

through belly
breathing
exercises
(qigong)
and tai chi
movements,
hwa was
recovering
the full-body
breath of
a child

becomes shallow, arising mainly from the throat. Shallow breathing supplies fewer nutrients to the body. As we grow older, accumulate stress, worries, and memories of the past, we unconsciously constrict full-body breathing until, in the final phases of life, our breath is gradually choked at the throat." Nature's secret chip is breath constriction as the body contracts through tension and shallow breathing. This self-destruct mechanism enforces evolution. Life provides us with the breathing apparatus we need to thrive, but inside this gift lies the hidden dynamic that contracts and finally exterminates life.

Always the enthusiastic health seeker, Grandmaster Jou went on to explain the practices he personally used to counteract Nature's clever ruse. Through deliberate belly breathing exercises (qigong) and through body-expanding Tai Chi movements, he was recovering the full-body breath of a child. This in turn was inverting the ageing process so that, in many ways, he was becoming younger, healthier, and more vibrant than he was 50 years ago.

What Jou explained with such excitement and relish was not entirely new. For thousands of years, the practices of Chi Kung (qigong) have included arm movements that open the torso and induce deep belly breathing. The rejuvenating power of "embryonic breathing" to regain the soft breath of a child is advertised by most systems of Chi Kung and Taoist yoga. The central importance of the belly – "hara" (Japanese) or "tantien" (Chinese) – was noted decades ago in books

on meditative self-cultivation, such as the books by Karlfried Graf von Dürckheim about the "vital center of the human being." Most vivid in Grandmaster Jou's explanation, however, was the intensity of his personal witness based on the turnabout he experienced in his own health.

Because so much contemporary culture squeezes us "into our heads" by constant cogitation, planning, information processing, we can learn from Jou Tsung Hwa's simple observation about the way life works. Our culture inclines toward what tennis players call "choking." The term first became popular with the Czech tennis player, Jana Novotna, whose infamous 1993 Wimbledon final against Steffi Graf brought "choking" into sports news. Again in her third-round match at the 1995 French Open, Novotna cracked under pressure when playing against the American Chanda Rubin. On both occasions, Jana Novotna cried out in anguish and shed tears of desperation so that one cruel San Francisco sports columnist gave her the name "No-No Novotna, the

lady from Choke-oslovakia." According to Webster's Dictionary, choking is: "To prevent from breathing by blocking the windpipe or squeezing the throat; to strangle or suffocate; to be blocked up; be obstructed or to be strained with emotion." The athlete who chokes becomes extremely tentative under competitive pressure and tightens the muscles, which results in an inability of the muscles to move smoothly as trained. Instead, self-doubts and negative self-talk afflict the athlete so that the game is played through a hypersensitive thought process rather than through a spontaneously flowing body. Choking is also known as "concrete elbow," "throat constriction," or "gagging."

For players who tend to choke, coaches recommend something called "circle breathing": Find an arbitrary place to focus (i.e. a place on the net, a spot on the racquet) and take a deep breath slowly and exhale slowly until the body feels relaxed. Go back to focus again on the spot. Repeat for a few cycles. Coaches recommend using the same focal point each time, to develop consistency. Hence comes the term "circle breathing." This is only part of the Chi Kung used to cultivate healthy longevity, but it is a good beginning nonetheless.

We all inhabit a high-speed, intensely active, and brain-driven culture. We need to take a deep breath whenever the opportunity arises or whenever we feel constricted by stress. Breathe deeply to play better! Breathe deeply to live longer! ■

DER AUTOR

Michael Heim, einer der wichtigsten Medienphilosophen der Internetepoche, lehrt am Art Center College of Design in Pasadena und ist Mitarbeiter bei .copy.