

The art of breath

When Covid hit his native Italy Luigi Zanini put his passion for martial arts and qigong teaching to practical use running breathing seminars for his company

Overleaf 

Besides my passion for martial art and qigong teaching over 40 years, my daily job is global business developer for a multinational company based in Europe. Last year the Covid-19 virus hit our country quite heavily and my company decided to invest time and energy in the welfare of its employees. I had already been teaching breathing techniques once a week in the company, so in May 2021 we decided to have a go via Teams. We held eight one-hour sessions on breathing basics and opened it to all colleagues.

As in my contribution to Tai Chi Caledonia 2021, I used a short Powerpoint presentation during our working time, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. It covered an introduction to the benefits of proper breathing and a four-point practical approach for effective breathing work. Of course using body and spirit together with conscious breath – as it is in qigong practice – would have had an even greater impact, but this webinar was meant to show what can be practised at one's desk, anytime, with any level of experience.

The official invitation stated:

“In 2020 we suddenly had to change the way we worked: relationships became complicated, the world will never be the same again. In 2021 we thought we had seen the worst, and instead of this we continue to have deadlines, strong commitments, customers calling, colleagues who interrupt, telephone ringing all the times: we are still under stress.

“But now we can learn to slow down, to get better, to restore calm inside, have greater mental clarity and perhaps even a pinch of serenity. Let's take this opportunity, let's love ourselves and take back control of our lives, stop the carousel when it runs too fast. We can slow down at any time, it's a simple thing, suitable for all ages, it costs nothing and it's really natural, like breathing. We can feel good when we want, just breathe. I wait for you to breathe together.”

Four languages

I repeated the same training twice, in four different languages (Italian, English, French, Spanish), with peaks of 50 to 60 people, sometimes with only a handful of co-breathers who attended the remote seminar, but the reactions have been quite enthusiastic and always very positive. People had immediate feedback in their bodies



Left: lungs and trees
Above: qigong earth
Right: standing
Top right: breath
Bottom right: closing

and enjoyed the two sessions, sending me messages that witness how simple tools can have a great impact on quality of life in a short time. Also, managers recommended that their staff follow the webinars and one branch of the group even closed down for the duration of the webinar, so that everybody could benefit from focusing on breath.

Lungs are like trees

In my presentation I started from the amazing and close analogy between lungs and trees and their functions, asking my colleagues to reflect on this similarity. I then introduced breath as THE bridge with awareness, as it works in meditation and in all flow states. Breath is involuntary, but also voluntary, and we can influence it; we breathe from birth to death, and it changes according to emotions, to moods, to shocks, exactly as changing the

breath can change the mood, and here lies the key. Moreover, breathing heavily influences the immune response, and this is very important in this Covid era. I mentioned also the very positive effects breath has on the whole body, its connection with the circulatory and nervous systems, with muscle performance and mind freshness, to mention only some of the beneficial aspects.

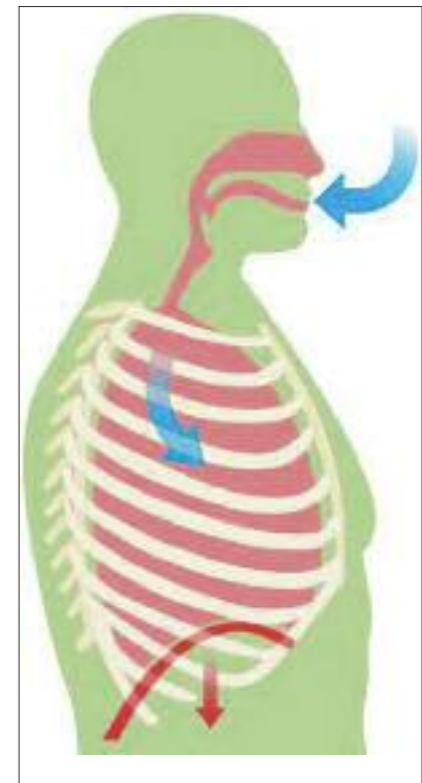
The four main practices I presented and worked on with my colleagues for over 40 effective minutes were:

- Exploring our current respiratory capacity, which is very short and shallow, and starting to extend inhaling and exhaling times, counting seconds. The resulting relaxation and feeling of well-being on the whole body were immediate and welcomed by everyone. Using belly and diaphragm to extend and deepen the ‘air’ intake was the takeaway of this first phase.

- Exploring inhalation and exhalation cycles, going quickly through a ‘fire breathing’ session and seeing the effects, then moving into the three characteristics of a good, whole breath: long, intense and deep. The second takeaway: use the whole body to breathe, not only lungs or belly, expand your imagination and your feelings.

- The third point of work was the use of apnea, or holding the breath, be it in full (inhaling) or in empty (exhaling) phases, using the so called triangular (‘in, hold, out’, or: ‘in, out, hold’) and square (‘in, hold, out, hold’) breathing methods. There, we can make some very important discoveries about ourselves and our fears, about asthma and or panic attacks among others. For that reason I invited everyone to explore the depths of holding empty and holding full lungs.

- The fourth phase was actually a recap on the previous points, where I asked my co-breathers to use breath for deep relaxation, managing all the previous aspects, and adding a new one, which is using the breath to cleanse the mind, just inhaling through the nose and being aware of



the contact between air and brain in the forefront of the head. Cleansing the mind, listening to the breath was the last takeaway.

As I said, nothing special in the end, but even at our office desks, sitting in front of a notebook, amidst the hurricane of a working day with stress charges, we can carve out some very relaxing moments where we can continue to do our jobs but add quality and value via breathing.

Apparently this approach has been very welcome at all levels in the

company, both from people already experienced in yoga or tai chi chuan and from absolute beginners, so much so that we are replicating the lessons in September with a dedicated seminar over six days, touching some formative points.



You can watch the session that was presented to Tai Chi Caledonia here
www.facebook.com/watch/?v=242658514115158