

How Tai Chi Breathing Can Make You Better, Faster, Stronger



Tai chi, often referred to as a moving meditation, is a martial arts discipline that combines slow, steady movements with deep, mindful breathing to achieve balance and harmony in the body, mind, and spirit—and it may be just what you need to run faster, lift heavier, and go longer.

Where Western fitness is often focused on developing individual parts of the body—legs through biking, chest and arms through weightlifting, etc.—tai chi is designed around full-body “effortless action.”

That doesn’t mean you aren’t exerting effort or getting in a good workout, but rather that your body and mind no longer perceive the effort as a struggle. Tai chi calls for eliminating that struggle so that the body works more efficiently and thus performs at its best.

At the core of tai chi’s effortless action is abdominal (a.k.a., diaphragmatic) breathing, which focuses on using your entire lung capacity instead of just the top lobes, as is the case with chest, or “thoracic” breathing. Breaths taken using your diaphragm to fully inflate the lungs are comparatively slower and deeper than thoracic breathing, delivering to the bloodstream **larger amounts of oxygen** essential to sustaining energy and endurance.

According to The BMJ, your body may benefit from a complete tai chi practice in the form of **improved metabolism, cardiovascular fitness, and stability**. However, if you don’t have time in your schedule for yet another fitness activity, simply merging the martial art’s breathing style with your workout of choice can be of benefit.

Why Combine Tai Chi Breathing With Your Workout?

Windmills, whips, and waving are a few common tai chi postures, but the practice is less about the proper placement of arms, legs, and torso and more about how breathing guides the body.

“When practiced regularly, tai chi can lead to better health, and a higher quality of physical and emotional life,” says **Ramel Rones**, tai chi master with Mind Body Consulting Therapies, Inc.

No matter your workout—be it running, walking, strength training, or cycling—breathing more efficiently can help you break through a fitness plateau.

Similar to the “high” runners often achieve—where exercise becomes effortless and you feel inexhaustible—tai chi breathing is meant to calm the body so that you can achieve a balance that puts you in flow with the exercise. When you feel like you’re in that zone, you can then work on upping your game.

Want to get in that zone? It starts by focusing on what’s known in tai chi as the “lower energy center”—a healing ball of energy

located two inches below your belly button. To tap into that space (and maximize the effectiveness of tai chi breathing), Ronos recommends visualizing this unique sense of inner energy as you inhale and exhale.

How to Perform Tai Chi Breathing

1. Begin in a standing or sitting position with your hands resting gently on your lower abdomen. Normally in tai chi breathing, you would place the tip of your tongue against your upper palate, and only breathe through your nose. But if you are going to use tai chi breathing for any sort of vigorous athletic endeavor, it's best to keep that passageway open as well. In short, utilize both your nose and mouth for breathing.
2. Draw air deep into your lungs using your diaphragm (you should notice your hands rise as you inhale, and gently fall as you exhale).
3. As you reach the end of one breath, begin the next, as if each inhale and exhale forms a continuous loop with no beginning or end. Your goal is to achieve a meditative state in which breathing feels natural and effortless, not controlled or uncontrolled (e.g., rapid panting).
4. Relax your entire body, allowing your breath to become longer and deeper.



5 Ways to Integrate Tai Chi Breathing Into Your Workout

Ronos explains there's a saying in classical tai chi texts that states "four ounces can overcome 1,000 pounds," suggesting a less stressful way to crush a workout than simply (and painfully) trying to power through it.

Dr. Mark Cheng, creator of the Tai Cheng workout.

"Through correct postural alignment, deep breathing, an empty mind, and grounding or rooting [connecting with the earth beneath your feet], one can reach a state of effortless action," he continues. Here are few tips from Ronos that can help you do that during your workout.

Observe your breath

Before you can adjust your breathing to a more tai chi-like rhythm, you first must be aware of how you're currently breathing. You might assume your body simply inhales and exhales as needed, but when it's stressed, you may unwittingly start breathing more sporadically. The more mindful you are of your breath, the faster you can correct irregularities with slow, deep breathing.

Count it out

When you're feeling short of breath, inhale and exhale for a count of three seconds each. The idea is to breathe deeply in a way that feels natural, not forced.

If you're gasping for air while running hard or pushing your limits in a Friday night bike group, take a moment to focus on your breathing, drawing deep, deliberate, diaphragmatic breaths. Check in with yourself every mile or so to ensure that your breathing facilitates efficient movement and fuels performance instead of sabotaging both.

Pace yourself

If the three-second cadence feels too slow (i.e., if you're not getting enough air), switch to a one or two-second count, or dial back your running or cycling speed. If the three second cadence feels too fast, slow it down to four or five seconds.

When performing strength exercises, use the inhalations and exhalations to guide your movement. For example, while doing a push-up, inhale as you lower your chest to within a few inches of the ground, and exhale as you push yourself back up to the starting position.

Be self-aware in your routine

Your body may be capable of doing more (or less) on one day than another, so try to be aware of your present physical and mental state. The more you practice this, Ronos says, the more your sensitivity and self-awareness will improve, and, consequently, your performance.

To put this into practice while exercising, ask yourself: Am I actually enjoying this? How can I make this routine more effective? Am I

breathing calmly throughout my workout and connecting my breath to my body?

Relax


Your brain views breathing as a lifeline, so if you're not taking in enough oxygen, [your mind may go into fight-or-flight mode](#), forcing shallow, panicked breaths to make up the difference. To avoid the related anxiety, slow down, catch your breath, and follow the advice in step one ("observe your breath").

The more you practice these steps—both at rest and while in motion—the more habitual and instinctive this breathing style will become. When you need the boost in energy to go longer, farther, or faster, you'll be able to tap into the energy store already within you by adopting a tai chi mindset toward your breathing.

Practice Mindfulness All Day

Don't be fooled by the seeming simplicity of ["just breathing."](#) It's important to be mindful of the types of breaths you're taking not only during your workout, but also throughout the rest of your day. If you notice that you're holding your breath or breathing irregularly—both of which Rones says can increase stress and anxiety—take a moment to clear your mind and begin taking slow, deep breaths. Try this tactic regardless of whether you're in the middle of a vigorous workout or simply stuck in traffic.

You can practice the breathing and movements of tai chi with the [Tai Cheng](#), one of many fitness programs you can stream anywhere with [Beachbody On Demand](#).

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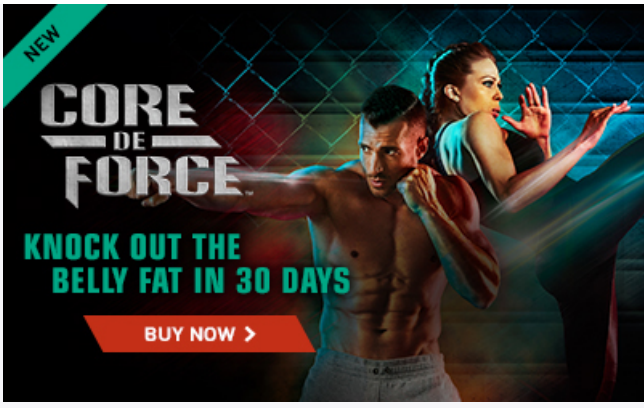
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