

# STAGES OF BREATHING

By Damo Mitchell

As we develop Gong in breathing, different classical qualities will arise: quiet, deep, at ease, slow, and cotton. Different traditions use between three and eight qualities, but they always amount to the same thing. Northern Daoism tends to use five categories. These are the five different stages that your breathing should go through based on the practice. They are five signs or markers of where you are in the process of finding the root of the breath and the root of the mind.

**Quiet:** Quiet means you can't hear it. At this stage, we are still talking about the manifestation level of your breath. If your breathing is heavy, that kind of breathing often is an obvious sign of poor health. It can mean a lot of dampness in the lungs, tightness in the diaphragm, mental tension, or high levels of stress. If you think the person sitting next to you can hear your breathing, maybe it needs to become a little bit quieter. At a basic level, before you do anything else, the first thing you need to do is relax your breath, which actually means relax your mind. You have to learn to relax, not only while sitting, but generally in life.

That's your first challenge. Figure out what is causing you stress and soften, because if you cannot get to the stage of the breath moving quietly, easing its way in and out through the nose into the body, then you're not going to get to the point where the mind can relax enough to go deeper.

**Deep:** Deep means the breath sinks down to the Lower Dan Tian. By the nature of going deep your breathing will lengthen, but it is about location, not length of breath. In Qi Gong or breath work, people commonly say "I can't breathe low; it's stuck in my chest." They want to know what method or muscle to use to get the breath to sink. Unless you are sitting incorrectly, there is nothing you can do to sink it. You simply have to move through the meditation process: relax the mind, let the breath become quiet, start to move through the process of listening with the senses, the mind/emotions, and gradually what will happen is the quiet breathing will change into deep breathing. It's a developmental stage that will take time. Eventually, it will drop down and you will automatically find that your breathing will sink to the Lower Dan Tian. If your breath is stuck in the solar plexus, at the level of the diaphragm, continue sitting, continue listening, and continue relaxing. As you move through that process, the breath will move down to the Lower Dan Tian. When it gets to that point the quality of deep has been achieved.

**At Ease:** At ease means the breath will naturally anchor itself at the Lower Dan Tian without effort. If it takes 20 minutes into your practice to relax and have the breath sink, then you are not at ease yet. It's not natural. If I go about my daily life and every time I put my mind in my body to see what it's doing, my breath is in the Lower Dan Tian, then the quality of at ease has been achieved.

It is worth repeating that you cannot place anything and expect it to be comfortable. Of course, beginners have to place their mind on the Dan Tian because you have to put the key in the ignition to get things going, but after that you shouldn't ever place anything anywhere. If I put my mind on the Dan Tian, it's like mental tension that the body doesn't really like. What you want is the mind to sink down to that place under the action of *Song*. It is the same with the breath. If you place your breath in the Lower Dan Tian, you are forcing it and you will not find the quality of at ease.

**Slow:** The next stage is slow but that doesn't mean the rate of breathing although the breathing will slow down. "Slow" actually refers to the quality of the Qi. When your breath sinks to the Lower Dan Tian and it is naturally anchored there, the next stage is the slow movement of the Qi. You can use Zifa Gong as an example. If your Zifa Gong is fast and jerky, then the breath has not yet reached the slow stage.

If your Zifa Gong is more coiling and smoother movements through the body, that's normally a sign that the Qi is moving more softly through the system. What is the quality of Qi doing to the nervous system and what is it doing to the body? Slow Qi movements can still be quite big, but you aren't shaking so much that your teeth are rattling around. Zifa Gong is only one manifestation of the quality of Qi, there are other types of movement of Qi through your system as well. This is why when we get the energy system active, the first instructions are "Sink. Sink the body. Sink tian tu, get everything going down." The sinking is a bodily way to help people go through this process.

**Cotton:** The quality of cotton means that it threads its way through the body and starts to pull and pulse, so that the Qi starts to move in and out. If you put your hand out and then you breathe you will feel it. You'll feel it like the sea washing up and down on the beach. You breathe out, and it feels like it touches the fingers. You breathe in, you feel it come up. If you stand and breathe out, it feels like the pressure increases between the floor and your hand and then the pressure decreases as you breathe in. The pulsing up and down through the body is because the soft tissues, or *huang*, stretch when the Qi moves into your system. Although the Qi is moving, you're feeling the stretch of the fascial system underneath the surface of the skin rather than

the Qi moving up and down. It means that the breath has integrated itself to such a level that the Qi is now moving through my system. When the soft tissues stretch, they conduct Qi, so it can be useful for moving Qi.