

# AI CHI

by Sharon Burns, CALA Trainer

Ai Chi was brought to North America by Ruth Sova of the Aquatic Therapy and Rehab Institute. Ai Chi was created by Jun Konno. Through his involvement as a coach in competitive swimming, Mr. Konno received numerous awards; Mr. Konno currently works as an Aquatic Therapist and practices Watsu and Ai Chi. Konno's inspiration for Ai Chi came from the traditional preference of Japanese participants for 'lower intensity, gentler movements' over 'dynamic, forceful exercise'. Konno also noticed that clients were somewhat uncomfortable with the close physical contact encountered in 'Watsu' - a passive form of therapy in which the practitioner supports the client in his or her arms while gently guiding the client's body through a series of movements.

Originally devised as a way to relax the client and gradually bring them in contact with the practitioner, 'Ai Chi' is now gaining popularity as a form of exercise. Studies at the University of Tsukuba and the University of Tokai have found that oxygen consumption rose by 4 to 7 percent during 'Ai Chi'. The breathing techniques increase oxygen flow to the brain and to other parts of the body; this may help with a host of diseases. Many clients, told by their doctors and physiotherapists to breathe better and deeper, have found 'Ai Chi' to be their ticket to achieving that goal.

Our autonomic nervous system controls all the functions that happen automatically in the human body, such as the blood circulating, the heart beating, and breathing. Within the nervous system are two other systems that need to be balanced: the parasympathetic system and sympathetic system. The parasympathetic system prepares us for rest, while the sympathetic system prepares us for activity; in most people these systems are not balanced, resulting in disease. Eastern medicine tells us that we can balance these systems with the use of breath: breathing is one part of the autonomic system that is both voluntary and involuntary.

There are three kinds of breathing: thoracic (what we normally do), clavicular (what we do when we are working out) and diaphragmatic (what we do when we are born.)

**Step one:** Start with diaphragmatic breathing (activates the sympathetic nervous system.) **Step two** is the complete yogic breath. The inhalation is two counts to fill the belly (diaphragmatic), two counts to widen the rib cage (thoracic) and two counts to lift the rib cage (clavicular). The ex-halation is the reverse: two counts to lower the rib cage, two counts to squeeze the rib cage and two counts to pull the belly in and up. Do this in small increments until you get accustomed to the yogic breath.

'Ai Chi' is performed in shoulder-deep water to lessen edema in the joints and decrease joint compression. The water environment enables some clients to encounter a 'freedom of movement' not found on land. It is important to caution these people to avoid overexerting themselves during the first few sessions. Participants are taught to relax and trust the water. As long as participants are moving and breathing, they are working towards better health and wellness. *Keep in mind that the simple act of breathing while submerged to the shoulders, is comparable to moderate forms of aerobic exercise.*

## BREATHING POSTURES

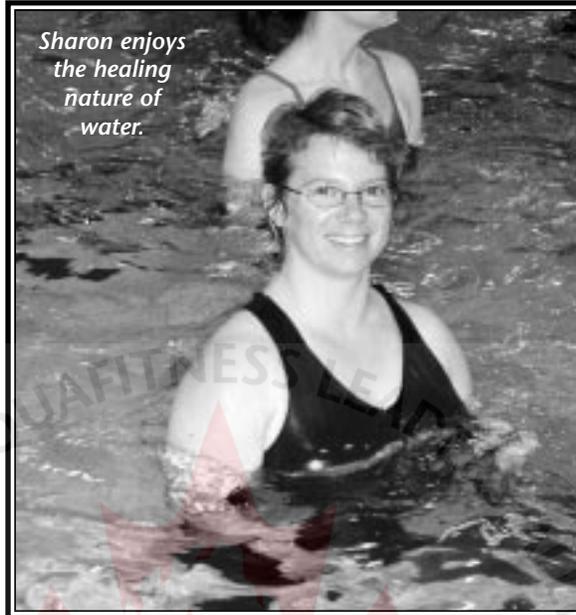
Following are the basic breathing postures; all are done in a wide stance, with feet and knees turned slightly out by externally rotating at the hip. Shoulders are submerged. Let your breath change your buoyancy as you trust the water to hold and support you.

### **Movement #1: Contemplating**

Stand with feet in a wide stance. Feet and knees are turned out slightly by externally rotating at the hip. Keep back straight. Arms are gently floating in the water at a 90 degree angle from the shoulders (shoulder flexion.) With inhale breath, gently supinate hands (palms up); with exhalation breath gently pronate hands (palms down). Feel the buoyancy of the body change with each inhale and exhale. Do this 5 to 10 times.

### **Movement #2: Floating**

In the same stance, perform shoulder extension with exhalation and shoulder flexion with inhalation. Again, palms turn up (supination) with the inhale and down (pronation) with the exhale. Repeat 5 to 10 times.



Sharon enjoys the healing nature of water.

### ***Movement #3: Uplifting***

Shoulder joint abduction with inhalation and shoulder joint adduction with exhalation. On exhalation, turn palms down and bring arms down by sides of body. On inhalation, turn palms up and raise arms to the surface out to sides. Repeat 5 to 10 times.

### ***Movement #4: Enclosing***

Horizontal shoulder adduction with exhalation, horizontal shoulder abduction with inhalation. Palms supinate with inhale and pronate with exhale. Repeat 5 to 10 times.

### ***Movement #5: Folding***

Adduction crossing the midline and abduction with elbows tucked in at the waist. Exhale easily and let hands turn palm down and gently cross in front of body at waist level. Inhale and keep elbows at waist, turn up palms and sweep hands to the side. Get a little taller in the water and open



*Lisa surprises Hilary,  
CALA Conference coordinator,  
as the delegates sing "Happy Birthday".*

the ribcage.

