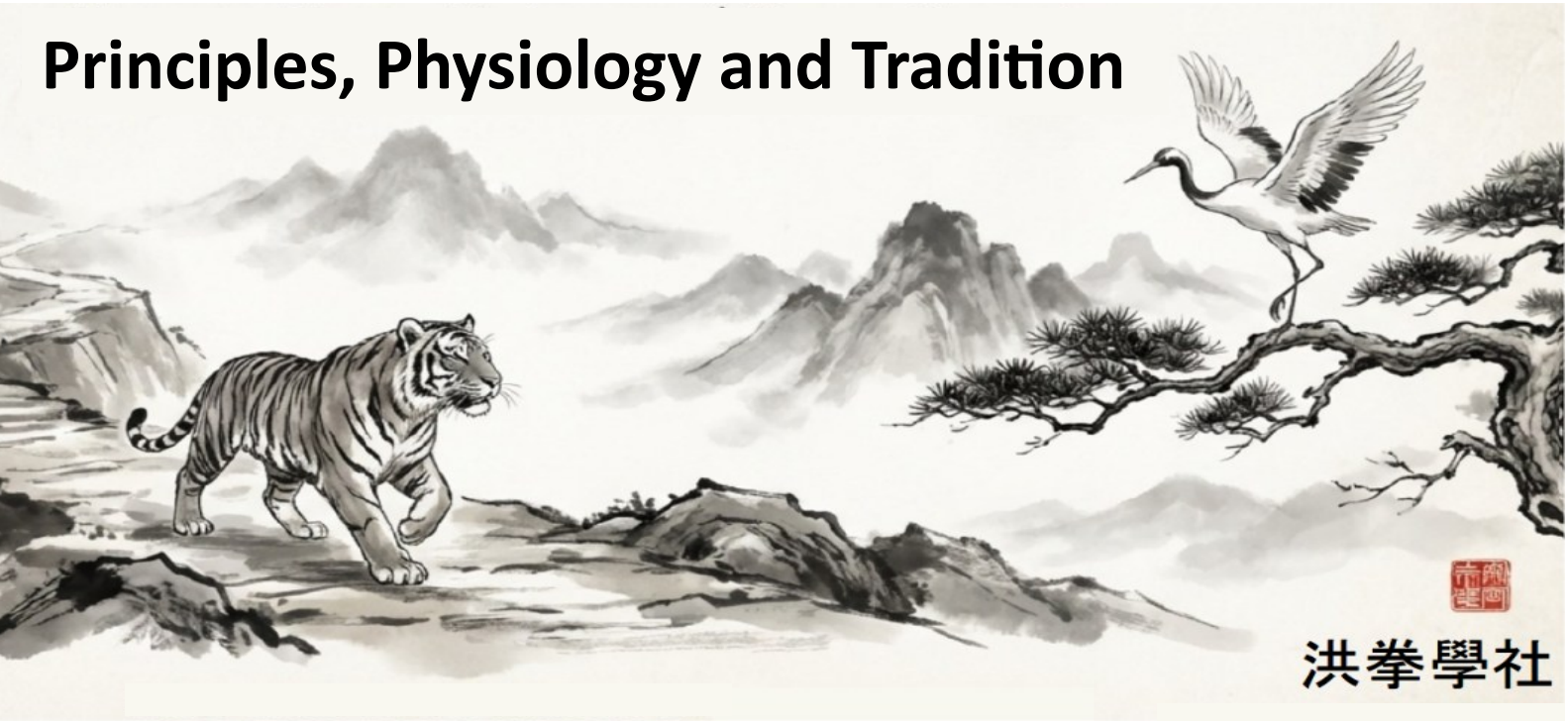
Breathing and Sound in Hung Gar

Principles, Physiology and Tradition



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Introduction

This paper is not offered as the final word on breathing, sound, or Hei Gung in Hung Gar. I do not present it as the expert, nor do I suggest that my understanding should replace the experience, judgment, or research of others. Instead, this is offered in a spirit of enquiry, practice, and contribution. Its objective is to give one perspective on the purpose and principles of breathing in Hung Gar, in the hope that it may support deeper understanding and encourage further thought, observation, and discussion.

Readers are encouraged to do their own research and to test these ideas through their own careful training and lived experience. In traditional arts such as Hung Gar, understanding does not come only from reading or theory. It also grows through years of practice, correction, reflection, and direct personal experience. For that reason, others may hold different views, use different language, or arrive at different conclusions based on their own lineage, training, and professional background. That is both natural and valuable.

The views presented here are based on my lifetime of involvement in Hung Gar, together with many decades of work and study in health sciences and Traditional Chinese Medicine. They reflect my personal opinions and understanding shaped by seven decades of Hung Gar experience, clinical practice as a licensed TCM practitioner since the 1970s, and formal academic study including a Ph.D. in Health Sciences. These backgrounds do not remove the need for humility. Rather, they make it even more important to present these ideas as **informed reflections rather than unquestionable facts**.

The intention in creating this paper is not to close discussion, but to open it. Breathing and sound in Hung Gar have often been explained in traditional language, modern scientific language, or a mixture of both. Sometimes these explanations agree, and sometimes they do not. By setting out a clear perspective that draws from martial arts experience, Traditional Chinese Medicine, and modern physiology, this paper aims to contribute to a broader and more thoughtful understanding of the subject.

A brief note on terminology is also helpful. In Mandarin, the term most commonly written in English today, referring to breathwork, is Qigong. In Cantonese usage, it is referred to as Hei Gung, and in some English-language martial arts contexts it may also written as Chi Gung. Because this paper is rooted in a Cantonese martial tradition, and after living most of my life in Hong Kong, the term Hei Gung will be used throughout. I acknowledge that Qigong and Chi Gung refer to the same broad idea of cultivated work with breath, energy, and internal development. In this context Qi, Hei and Chi can be regarded as synonyms.

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The Practical Purpose of Sound

Sounds and breathing in Hung Gar serve practical purposes that can be explained clearly through human physiology, while traditional Sifus, including myself, may describe the same effects through the language of Hei, bridges, and internal power.

When students shape the breath with short, sharp, or sustained sounds, they are changing pressure inside the chest and abdomen, improving or disrupting trunk stability, affecting blood flow, influencing voice production, and shifting the state of the nervous system. In this sense, the sounds are not separate from breathing. They are forms of controlled exhalation matched to movement and intent.

In Hung Gar, a sound made during striking, bracing, or tension work is best understood as a shaped exhale. A short, sharp sound fits an explosive action because it produces a quick release of air and helps organize the body at the moment of force, while a longer sound fits slower and more sustained actions because it supports a longer, steadier exhalation. When the breath and sound are timed well, the trunk becomes more stable, the force from the legs and hips transfers more cleanly through the body, and the practitioner often feels more focused and committed to the action.

This is one reason many martial artists across styles vocalize during exertion. The sound itself is not mystical power, but it can help the body avoid poor breath holding, improve coordination between breath and force, and sharpen mental intensity at the point of movement. Traditional explanations may describe this as releasing pressure, expressing bridge energy, or issuing power from the Daan Tin, while modern physiology would describe it as breath-driven stabilization and neuromuscular timing. Daan Tin refers to the energy centres in traditional Chinese medicine and martial arts.

Pressure, Stability, and Force

One of the main functions of proper breathing in Hung Gar is pressure management. When a practitioner exhales during effort instead of trapping air in the chest, the body avoids an excessive Valsalva-type pattern in which intrathoracic pressure rises sharply and interferes with normal blood return to the heart. At the same time, a controlled exhale can help tighten the abdominal wall and surrounding trunk muscles enough to support the spine and link the lower body to the striking limbs. The Valsalva manoeuvre and pattern is when someone forcefully tries to exhale against a closed airway (for example by holding the breath and straining), which sharply increases pressure in the chest and alters blood flow, heart rate, and blood pressure.

This is why correct sound work can make technique feel both stronger and safer. The body becomes firm without turning rigid, and the practitioner is less likely to feel the heavy head pressure, tunnel vision, or dizziness that often appear when force is produced while the breath is clamped shut. In this way, good Hei Gung does not merely add drama to a form. It helps regulate the mechanical conditions under which force is produced.

Exhalation and Oxygen Exchange

Breathing in Hung Gar is not only about power. It is also about efficient gas exchange. Air enters the lungs and reaches millions of tiny air sacs where oxygen moves into the blood and carbon dioxide moves out. For this exchange to remain efficient, the body must not only inhale well but also exhale well, because fresh air cannot fully replace older air if exhalation remains shallow or incomplete.

This is why diaphragmatic breathing matters. When the diaphragm descends during inhalation and rises during exhalation, the lower ribs and belly can move more freely, allowing a fuller breathing cycle than upper-chest breathing alone. If a practitioner habitually and repeatedly stacks one breath on top of another without properly emptying the lungs, more stale air remains in the lungs, carbon dioxide clearance becomes less effective, and the next inhalation may feel large without actually refreshing the system as well as it could.

It is useful to emphasize this point. The lungs can never be emptied completely in normal breathing because a residual volume always remains, and carbon dioxide is not simply held in the lungs in an all-or-nothing way. The more accurate explanation is that **deeper, more complete exhalation within a comfortable range improves ventilation of the lungs and makes the next inhalation more effective**, while chronically shallow breathing limits that efficiency.

The Role of the Lower Part of the Lungs

For students learning Hung Gar, it is helpful to understand why lower-rib and diaphragmatic breathing are emphasized so often. In an upright person, blood flow is generally greatest in the lower regions of the lungs due to gravity, which means that ventilation in those regions is especially valuable for efficient oxygen transfer. When breathing is shallow and mostly in the upper chest, the lower lungs may be underused relative to their role in gas exchange.

This does not mean the upper lungs “hold less oxygen” in a simple storage sense. Rather, the more precise point is that the lower parts of the lungs usually have better matching between airflow and blood flow, so breathing patterns that recruit the diaphragm and lower ribs tend to support more efficient oxygenation. Hung Gar breathing methods that encourage **full but**

controlled exhalation and fuller inhalation can therefore improve the practical use of lung volume, especially during slower internal training and heavy stance work.

Humming, Resonance, and Nitric Oxide

Some breathing and sound methods also involve a humming or resonant quality, especially during quieter internal practice in some of our Hung Gar training. This is relevant not only as a subjective training feeling but also because humming through the nose has been shown to increase nitric oxide in the nasal cavity and sinuses. Nitric oxide in the upper airways helps regulate local airflow and has roles in airway function and host defence, which offers a modern physiological basis for why gentle nasal humming may feel unusually smooth or calming.

This point should still be presented with balance. A humming sound is not a shortcut to dramatic systemic performance gains, and it does not prove traditional organ-resonance theories. What it does support is the more modest and credible claim that certain quiet sound practices can change the breathing environment in the nose and sinuses and may encourage a steadier, more efficient pattern of nasal breathing.

Effects on the Nervous System

Breathing and sound also influence the state of the nervous system. Slower breathing with a **longer, smoother exhale** tends to support a calmer parasympathetic nervous system state, while short, forceful exhales paired with muscular engagement tend to increase sympathetic nervous system arousal and readiness. Hung Gar uses both qualities, since sometimes we require fierceness and explosive intent while at other times we require rootedness, control, and regulated tension.

This helps explain why different sounds can feel different even when no organ-specific vibration is taking place. A long, even sound may settle the body and reduce unnecessary tension, while a short, aggressive sound may raise alertness and sharpen intent. In modern terms, the sound changes breathing pattern, trunk recruitment, and autonomic tone. In traditional language, it may be described as guiding Hei, expressing bridge force, or matching the correct internal state to the technique.

What Can Go Wrong

The main risks of poor breathing in Hung Gar are real, but they are often described too dramatically in traditional warnings. The most immediate problem is **prolonged breath**

holding under strain, which can create a strong Valsalva manoeuvre and lead to abrupt pressure changes in the chest, reduced venous return, dizziness, tunnel vision, ringing in the ears, or a feeling of pressure in the head and chest. For healthy younger practitioners this is usually temporary, but for older students or those with hypertension or cardiovascular disease it can be more concerning.

Another risk is chronic overuse of the throat. If the sound is driven by squeezing the larynx instead of supporting airflow with the diaphragm and trunk, the voice can become hoarse, strained, or inflamed over time. This aligns closely with the old rule that **the sound should come from the Daan Tin and not from the throat**, though the modern explanation is about airflow, laryngeal tension, and vocal hygiene rather than mysterious energy leakage.

Poor breathing can also build unhelpful long-term patterns. If a practitioner repeatedly trains with raised shoulders, upper-chest breathing, neck tension, and incomplete exhalation, the result may be chronic tightness in the chest and shoulders, feelings of shallow breathing, headaches, or difficulty relaxing after training. Traditional schools, and indeed TCM, may describe this as Hei blockage or Hei and blood stagnation, but modern physiology would interpret it as maladaptive breathing mechanics, muscle tension, and stress-state conditioning.

Traditional Claims That Lack Strong Support

Some traditional explanations move beyond what modern physics and physiology can support. The claim that specific syllables or sounds directly vibrate and stimulate a single internal organ, such as the lungs or liver, does not have strong evidence behind it at normal vocal intensities. Human vocalization certainly creates vibration in the airway, chest, and surrounding tissues, but there is no clear basis for saying that one sound selectively treats one deep organ in a direct mechanical way.

This does not mean the traditional models are useless. They can still function as training maps that guide timing, emotional tone, and the quality of tension and release. A wrong sound may not injure the liver because of the syllable itself, but it may encourage the wrong breathing pattern, the wrong level of tension, or the wrong mental state for the movement, and those mistakes can produce real effects in the body.

The stronger warning that even a slight mistake can injure the internal organs is also best treated as an exaggeration meant to enforce careful teaching. Small errors in breathing are much more likely to cause dizziness, loss of coordination, throat strain, or excessive pressure than structural injury to internal organs in healthy adults. Serious risk rises with intensity, repetition, poor supervision, and pre-existing medical conditions rather than from minor mistakes alone.

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Iron Wire (Tit Sin Kuen) and Training Caution

These cautions matter most in advanced sets such as Tit Sin Kuen, which many Hung Gar teachers describe as a demanding combination of tension, breathing, and sound. Because this type of practice can involve sustained muscular effort and strong pressure changes, poor technique is more likely to create dizziness, blood pressure spikes, over-bracing, and throat strain than in ordinary relaxed form work. This gives a sensible physiological basis to the traditional insistence on gradual instruction and close correction.

Traditional restrictions on youth training can also be understood in practical terms. While late adolescents generally have mature organ function, younger students are still developing coordination, breathing habits, and tolerance for heavy isometric effort, so highly forceful tension-breath methods are reasonably taught with caution. The traditional principle of don't teach students under eighteen the breathing techniques of Tit Sin Kuen is more of a conservative traditional rule than a precise medical threshold, but the protective intent behind it is understandable.

A Modern Way to Explain the Breath Work, or Hei Gung, in Hung Gar

A modern explanation of Hei Gung in Hung Gar can respect the traditional art while keeping the claims accurate. The sounds we use help students to time the exhale to the action, regulate pressure in the chest and abdomen, support the trunk, improve the use of lung volume, affect focus and intent, and in some quiet nasal practices may increase nitric oxide in the nasal passages through humming. These are practical, observable functions that can be trained and corrected.

At the same time, the explanation should avoid claims that are stronger than the evidence allows. As I have mentioned already and reiterate here, there is little support for the idea that single syllables directly heal or damage specific internal organs through vibration alone. The more credible view is that sounds matter because they shape exhalation, body tension, vocal use, and nervous-system state, and those factors together change how the practitioner feels and performs.

Understood this way, breathing in Hung Gar is not an ornament added to the forms. It is a method for controlling pressure, structure, oxygen exchange, voice production, and mental state so that movement becomes both more effective and safer. That is the clearest modern physiological account of the purpose and principles of breathing, or Hei Gung, in Hung Gar.

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Hei Gung is highly relevant to any serious explanation of breathing in Hung Gar. The term combines Hei, which can refer to the breath, vital influence, or internal vitality, with Gung, meaning cultivated skill or disciplined work, and this places breathing practice within the same broad idea of trained accomplishment that also appears in the word Kung Fu. In martial contexts, Hei Gung is not limited to health exercise alone but refers more broadly to methods that regulate the body, breath, mind, and spirit in order to support both wellbeing and martial performance.

Within traditional Chinese martial arts, such as Hung Gar, Hei Gung practices commonly involve posture, stance, movement, breathing pattern, and focused attention working together. Their purpose is not simply relaxation but the cultivation of body awareness, pressure control, internal coordination, and mental steadiness, all of which are directly relevant to martial ability. From a modern standpoint, these methods can improve breathing efficiency, trunk stability, concentration, and self-regulation under stress, which helps explain why they have remained central to so many systems.

In Hung Gar, these principles are not separate from the forms but deeply integrated into them. The system uses stances, tension and release, structured breathing, spirit, and controlled sound to train how the body organizes force and maintains composure. This is especially clear in methods such as Iron Wire (Tit Sin Kuen), where the practitioner is not only moving through shapes but also learning how breath, posture, intention, spirit, emotion, and sound combine to build strength, focus, and internal control.

Seen in this way, Hei Gung in Hung Gar acts as a bridge between external technique and internal development. It supports health by improving breathing habits and reducing careless strain, supports focus by teaching control of attention and arousal, and supports martial growth by helping students connect structure, breath, and intent in a disciplined way. This is why breathing in Hung Gar should not be treated as an optional extra added to the forms, but as part of the deeper training of body, mind, and spirit that allows the practitioner of the art to mature over time.

Sound, Breathing, and the Five Tones in Hung Gar

The traditional Chinese musical pentatonic system uses five tones: gong (宮), shang (商), jue (角), zhi (徵), and yu (羽). In Cantonese these are gung[1], seung[1], gok[3], zing[1], jyu[5]. These tones are best understood as **relative scale positions**, not fixed note names. In other words, Gong does not always mean the note C. It means the first note of the chosen scale. If Gong is set to C, the tones become C, D, E, G, and A. If Gong is set to D, the tones become D, E, F-sharp, A, and B.

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In Western music, the major pentatonic uses scale degrees 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6 of the major scale. Note that 4 and 7 are missing in order to create the pentatonic scale, as distinct from the familiar 7-note scale. In C major, those notes are C, D, E, G, and A, which matches Gong, Shang, Jue, Zhi, and Yu when gong is placed on C. The structure is therefore very similar, even though Chinese music theory uses a different language and a different cultural framework.

In TCM, the five tones are linked with the Five Elements, the five yin organs, and the emotions. The usual mapping is Gong with Earth and Spleen, Shang with Metal and Lungs, Jue with Wood and Liver, Zhi with Fire and Heart, and Yu with Water and Kidneys. In this model, sound is not viewed as just entertainment. It is part of a larger system in which breathing, feeling, attention, intent, and internal balance all affect health.

Some TCM writers may also explain this through the idea of resonance. This should be understood carefully. It does not simply mean that one note physically vibrates one organ and heals it like a machine repair. Rather, the idea is that a tone may support an organ system by shaping the breath, calming or moving emotion, changing body tension, and influencing the flow of Hei. In practice, this makes the effect of sound part of a whole-body process, not a single direct cause-and-effect event.

Modern scientific studies have found some encouraging results, but they have not fully proved the stronger claims. One study in healthy adults reported the strongest responses in the traditional tone-organ pairs, such as Gong with the spleen system and Shang with the lung system. Other studies and reviews of five-element music therapy have reported improvements in mood, sleep, pain, fatigue, and quality of life when the music was added to standard care. A 2025 review found that Chinese Five-Element Music may help depression, anxiety, and sleep problems in older adults, but it also noted that the available studies were of only moderate quality and that better research is still needed.

For Hung Gar practice, this leads to a careful and balanced conclusion. It is reasonable to say that martial sound and breathing may help students regulate breathing, focus attention, release excess tension, and support general well-being. It is not scientifically proven that copying one special tone will directly strengthen or heal one specific organ in a reliable medical way. A responsible teaching approach is to present the five-tone model as a traditional framework that may deepen awareness of breath, emotion, intent and posture, while making clear that the stronger organ-specific healing claims remain under study.

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Relevance to Hung Gar

In a martial context, matching a tone from the traditional tones referred to in TCM does not mean singing or sounding an exact musical note. It means producing a body-made sound that expresses the same quality as that tone through breath, posture, and intent. You are not being asked to “hit C” or “hit G” like a musician. You are being asked to create a sound-feel that matches the traditional functional-feeling of that tone.

Based on my own Hung Gar experiences, as well as TCM clinical practice, and research and understanding of the classics of TCM, I have created my own relationship model to explain the meaning of the “tones”, based on three key principles:

1. Breath, meaning how the air enters and leaves the body, such as long or short, soft or forceful, deep or superficial.
2. Posture, meaning what the joints, ribs, spine, chest, belly, and limbs are doing while the sound is made.
3. Intent, meaning mindset and the actions to be expressed, while incorporating the 12 Bridges and the settling, opening, clearing, lifting, or rooting of the stances.

From a TCM perspective the “tone” means the total sound-quality made by those three principles acting together, not just a pitch on a musical instrument.

The following table helps to explain the concept and its relationship to Hung Gar practices.

This material is new territory for most of us, and I do not pretend to have all the answers. What I am offering here is a first attempt to connect traditional ideas about tones, Elements, and organs with the lived experience of Hung Gar training. I warmly welcome questions, comments, and different viewpoints so that we can all keep learning and refining our understanding together.

In terms of the specific vocal sounds that we each use in Hung Gar, there is no fixed magic formula. The sounds arise naturally from the way we breathe, move, and focus in each form and situation, and vary depending on our fitness and present exhaustion level. Yet, when we look at them through the lens of these patterns and relationships, it is striking how similar the sounds may be across different Hung Gar families. This suggests that the Hung Gar art itself has been shaping these expressions for a long time, even if we are only now beginning to describe them in this way.

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Relationship of Five-Element Tones to Organ Patterns and Hung Gar Practice

Element	Tone	Organs	Main Pattern	Sound Quality	Breath Cue	Posture Cue	Intent Cue	Hung Gar Use Cue
Wood	角 Jue gok[3]	Liver, Gall bladder	Constraint, planning, purpose, creative	Lively, expansive, rising	Long, smooth exhale	Open ribs, lengthened spine, elastic limbs	Release pressure, restore flow	Stretching power, uncoiling, bridge release
Fire	徵 Zhi zing[1]	Heart, Small intestine	Connection, spirit, acumen, clarity	Bright, strong, uplifting	Full but not strained exhale	Chest open without puffing, lively frame	Lift spirit, bright focus	Explosive with clear intent
Earth	宮 Gong gung[1]	Spleen, Stomach	Transformation, thinking, obsessive	Steady, grounded, even	Slow, smooth, focused exhale	Sink weight, stable pelvis, relaxed abdomen	Settle, gather, centre	Stance work, rooting, absorbing force
Metal	商 Shang seung[1]	Lungs, Large intestine	Grief, worry, instinct, evaluation, survival	Clear, clean, piercing	Crisp but relaxed exhale	Back wide, chest open, shoulders released	Clear out, let go, refine	Sharp strikes, fast release, clean finish
Water	羽 Yu jyu[5]	Kidneys, Bladder	Will power, courage, determination	Deep, soft, flowing	Deep, quiet, longer exhale	Lower centre engaged, spine settled, hips rooted	Store, anchor, conserve	Rooting, recovery, endurance

Based on the above relationship model, think of this as an **analogy** that matches the TCM deeper meaning of the tones, and not its exact pitch measurement. Each Element has a known direction, feeling, and body pattern in Chinese medicine. The tone is treated in traditional Chinese terms as the musical expression of what constitutes that same pattern.

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Wood is linked with spring, wind, growth, tendons, and frustration. So, its tone may be described as long, flowing, and expansive. In martial terms, this suggests a smoother, lengthened exhale, an open ribcage, and a feeling of uncoiling instead of bracing.

Fire is linked with summer, heat, circulation, joy, and spirit. So, its tone may be described as bright, lively, and rising. In martial terms, this suggests a fuller outgoing breath, an alert and open chest, and a feeling of projecting clear intent outward, like a spark that becomes a flame.

Earth is linked with centering, nourishment, flesh, digestion, and steady support. So, its tone may be described as even, grounded, and balanced. In martial terms, this suggests a smooth centred exhale, a settled belly, strong stance, and the feeling of gathering and stabilizing the body like firm ground under the feet.

Metal is linked with autumn, the lungs, grief, skin, and the power to clear and let go. So, its tone may be described as clean, precise, and cutting. In martial terms, this suggests a crisp but relaxed exhale, a wide upper back, released shoulders, and a feeling of clearing excess tension away, like a blade making a clean line through space.

Water is linked with winter, storage, bones, fear, and deep reserves. So, its tone may be described as lower, softer, and more hidden. In martial terms, this suggests a deeper quieter exhale, a settled spine and hips, and a feeling of sinking and storing power, like water pooling in depth before moving with force.

Perhaps another helpful way to explain and understand this is to compare it with famous Western music composers. A great composer does not only arrange notes on a page. The music also carries human feeling, purpose, and emotional direction when it is performed. In the same way, the Chinese five tones are not just technical scale steps. In traditional thought, they are sound-patterns that express the qualities of the Five Elements and the organ-emotion systems linked with them. This does not prove that a tone is a medical treatment by itself, but it does help explain why sound, breath, posture, and intent are treated as one connected practice.

This model provides a useful way to think about the martial sounds we make without turning it into mystical pitch hunting. The goal is not to sing exact notes during combat. The goal is to use sound, breath, posture, and intent together in a way that matches the training quality being developed. Used this way, the five-tone system can be presented as a traditional teaching framework for awareness and regulation, while the stronger medical claims are described honestly as interesting but still not fully proven by modern science.

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For Hung Gar practice, this leads to a careful and balanced conclusion. It is reasonable to say that martial sound and breathing may help students regulate breathing, focus attention, release excess tension, and support general well-being. It is not scientifically proven that copying one special tone will directly strengthen or heal one specific organ in a reliable medical way. A responsible teaching approach is to present the five-tone model as a traditional framework that may deepen awareness of breath, emotion, and posture, while making clear that the stronger organ-specific healing claims remain under study.

For practitioners who, like me, may use these tonal correspondences to regain composure during physical exertion, the emotional and mindful quality may be as important as the sound itself. In TCM, emotions are not treated as separate from the body but as part of how the organ systems express and influence health. Deliberately touching brief moments of joy, sympathy, grief, worry, fear, or anger within practice can be understood as a form of internal regulation rather than mere theatrical expression. This may help explain why some practitioners find that the sounds feel incomplete unless they are matched with the correct breath, posture, intent, as well as emotion.

From a modern scientific standpoint, these correspondences should still be described carefully. There is little direct evidence that a particular syllable or musical tone mechanically stimulates one organ in a specific and isolated way. What is more plausible is that specific sounds, breathing patterns, and emotional expressions change posture, autonomic tone, facial expression, muscle recruitment, and mental state, and that these changes then affect the whole organism in ways that traditional language maps onto the Five Elements and organ networks. In that sense, the TCM model may be presented as a meaningful traditional interpretive system that has strongly shaped the way breathing and sound have been understood in traditional Chinese martial arts over many generations.

As I have grown older, I find myself relying more on vocal sound during training than I did in my younger years. The sounds seem to help me breathe in a more steady and efficient way, so I can adjust and restore my blood-oxygen levels and maintain my stamina for longer. When we are young, this support may be less noticeable, or simply feel less necessary, but with age it becomes much easier to appreciate how important sound and breath really are.