

# What is Hara?

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1. DAN. SEITOKAI KARATE-DO SHOTOKAN

The concept of Hara, what actually is it and why it is so important part of budo especially in karate-do and also generally in life itself?

Let's open that a bit shall we.

So the word Hara is a Japanese word that has no equivalent in English. While it literally refers to the lower abdomen, the term also has psychological and spiritual connotations in Japanese language and culture. In fact, Hara can be seen as the unification of a persons' physical, psychological and spiritual dimensions. That being said Hara has many definitions of what it is in the way how it functions and by the description and translation, but despite of all the different views of Hara they all have mostly this in common;

"Hara is a place in a persons' body and it's a place of energy".

There are some open translations of Hara that can be understood for example as a "sea of energy", a "seat of enlightenment", or even as "the center of universe".

Since the Hara has that many aspects to think about I will open these aspects in the text from three different standpoints. This way the reader should have a better understanding about how much there actually is to know about Hara.

The standpoints are; science, spiritual and karate. I will also share my own personal experiences and thoughts about Hara.

Let's begin.

## *HARA FROM SCIENTIFIC STANDPOINT*

Since Hara is a “place” in a persons' body it can also be located. Hara can be found about two inches below the navel and inwards from the skin. That's the center from where one enters life and that is the center from where one dies and goes out of life. It has been said that it is the contact center between the body and the soul. It's also interesting to realize that as a fetus we were fed through the navel. In fact you could still feed (on energy) through the Hara if you were to open all the energetic blockages in the belly. One method to open these energetic blockages would be for example by performing the “OSHO Dynamic Meditation”.

The fact that Hara contains the vitality of an individual, a famous Japanese (samurai) way to commit a suicide was to “cut the Hara” or “Hara-Kiri” (abdomen-cut). Nowadays it's strictly prohibited but times ago it was thought to be honorable way to end a persons' life.

But why Hara is called to be a place of energy? There are a few scientific and actually pretty reasonable approaches to this question. One would be that since Hara is located in the belly, which also happens to be the place where we digest our food. The energy that you'll get from digesting your food will eventually also be absorbed into the energy for the body to use. On the other hand all the major muscle groups crosses through the Hara from the front and back of the body. There has been new studies in human anatomy about the "muscle fascias" and the studies says that these muscles fascias connects every muscle in a persons' body as a "chain" in a way that everything is linked to one and another, meaning that the body is a "whole unit" and not separated from the lower body to upper body and so on. But the reason why this fact would be so important is that all these muscle fascia chains crosses only through your hips over the Hara or close to it. This fact would also explain why the control of the hip movement in almost every sport is so crucial in order to have the highest performance on the field. The same goes to karate, with a proper and strong use of the hip (Hara) you can make your movements so much faster and stronger than what they would be just with the hands and legs as they are. Maybe the saying; "The power comes from your hip" has some point behind it.

Now that we have an idea why Hara is a place of energy, we still have to make one thing clear. Even though Hara is a place in a body, it's not a material thing that you could poke your finger with, or in a way you can but let me explain this one. This can be a little bit confusing to understand because it's not like an organ such as a heart or a liver which you can easily spot and actually hold in your hands. The better way to understand Hara is to think that it's like a mind, you know that you have it, and it's around your brains, but you can't hold it. The same goes to Hara, we know that it's there in the stomach, but we can't show it in a picture like; “Hey look at this! This here is a Hara”. Just like a mind or even a soul, those are actual things that we know and feel that they do exist but they cannot be hold in the hands, the same goes to Hara. It is there and you can feel it.

## *HARA FROM THE SPIRITUAL STANDPOINT*

Now that we know a little bit what science has to say about Hara, it's time to get spiritual.

There is a very good phrase which describes the less physical sense of Hara; "Hara ga dekite iru". The phrase literally means, "The stomach is complete" but it has nothing to do with having a finely crafted six-pack. "Hara ga dekite iru" refers to having a calm mind even in times of urgency – meaning someone who is able to deal with any situation calmly. In the past in Japan, training the martial arts strengthened your spirit and by so it allowed you to keep your presence of mind completely calm even in the face of death. Could this mean that the body is your mind and the mind is your body? So even though that Hara has been considered as a thing that produces energy for our movements to become stronger and so on, it can also strengthen the spirit in order to become more confident, fearless and grounded person. Actually there has been some research about human behavior that human body can and will manifest the experienced emotions in the body as a physical appearance. That can be easily seen with the guys who have very high self-esteem, they walk with a great posture eyes forward chest high and body proudly "open". On the other hand the guys with low self-esteem tend to have poorly rounded shoulders, they kind of "close" themselves in a tight and close posture and they usually shy to look forward. How this can be seen with a martial artist then? Well it's hard to say because usually martial artists don't shout out that they do martial arts, you probably wouldn't even know by the look that the person does martial arts. What I would say is that they just keep it cool and are comfortable with their being. They have a better control over their emotions and they don't let the ego control themselves too much. But when the situation arises they are able to bring that inner force that "Hara ga dekite iru" and deal with the situation having a "calm mind". As you can see training martial arts will also on the long term strengthen your spirit. By becoming more mindful about your Hara and training it will only boost your spirit to grow even stronger. These things being said Hara will as well be a matter to consider from the spiritual aspect.

The word Hara, in Japan is also deeply interlinked with the word, Tanden (Chinese – Dantian). Tanden is translated from the Japanese to mean cinnabar field and is also known as the elixir field. It can therefore be understood as a place in the body where the elixir of life is created. While Hara, as conceptualized by the Chinese and Japanese Martial Arts, is important for their practice, because it is seen as the term "Sea of Qi (energy)" indicates, as the reservoir of vital or source energy (Yuan Qi). It's in other words the vital center of the body as well as the center of gravity. For many martial arts, the extension of energy or force from this center is a common concept. On the other hand In Traditional Chinese medicine the by-name Dantian (Chinese – Tanden) is given alternatively to three acupuncture points: the "Gate of Origin", and the "Sea of Qi", and by some, also to the "Stone Gate". All three points are situated on the midline (center of the linea alba) of the lower abdomen below the navel. They constitute part of the Ren Mai, usually translated as Conception Vessel, which is one of

the Qi Jing Ba Mai, the Eight Extraordinary Vessels or eminent energy pathways of the body. That may be a part reason for Danten to be called as an “elixir field”? The needling points mentioned above represent a place from which the "Sea of Qi" can be reached and influenced - either via the energy flow (the use of Hara) along the Ren Mai (Conception Vessel) or by palpation or penetrating deeper into the abdomen with a acupuncture needle. Despite widespread belief of Qi, the reality of Qi is that it's a non-scientific, unverifiable concept. That being said the words Hara and Tanden are not intellectual concepts, they instead refer to the actual experience. This brings to a commonly held approach to spirituality that exists today where it is believed that to follow the spiritual path one must develop the energy centers in the head, often called the third eye or crown center. One of the main reasons for this is the modern craving to understand spirituality from an intellectual rather than an experiential standpoint. The downside what will happen from this is that the person starts training from the mind which then is a beginning of an unbalanced energetic body. That being said if you expand your energy solely at the head, with no expansion of energy below your navel or in the lower part of your body, your energy becomes like an upside down pyramid. And the problem with being an upside down pyramid is that it's top heavy. The pyramid will have hard times trying to balance, it's very wobbly and it will eventually fall down.

In all major traditional spiritual practices it's a solid foundation which is first needed in order for one to grow spiritually, the same goes to karate. This foundation is centered below your navel in the Hara. Nature itself reflects this. For a tree to reach the heavens it must first grow a thorough root system. Without this, the tree is liable to be affected by each small change of weather that moves around it until one day a gust of wind breezes along and blows it over. When you see seated meditators, their legs are either crossed or in seiza, they are physically resembling a solid base of the foundation of a pyramid. But it's important not to get this idea wrong, the foundation is everything but it can't be the only thing. The 7th Dan Aikido teacher William Gleason has put this well in a words.

He writes this about developing Hara:

*“In the center of the brain is another energy-producing center or Hara, from which new consciousness is born. When these two centers [below the navel and the head] are combined, great spiritual power can be realized.....Practicing Aikido day in and out, these two Hara centers become united vertically; the will becomes rooted in the body's physical center and the excess activity of the mind ceases. Heaven (mind) and earth (body) are united through spirit (the will). In this way the total meaning of Hara, body-mind, is realized.”*

As Mr. Gleason says, it's not just one thing that will define the Hara. It's the wholeness that matters and which defines the Hara, the body, mind and spirit they all matter when

considering Hara at its fullest meaning. Maybe this is also what they mean by Hara being; "The center of universe".

Thinking and rationalizing is what is needed but that cannot be the only thing. It's a part of our human nature to understand and to give things a meaning but at some point we just got to let go and trust that the thing what we feel or see cannot be anything else but experienced and felt. Otherwise we start the overthinking and make it all just the head game trying to rationalize all the ideas and feelings what we have and by so the experiences in the body will be neglected. This again would be the beginning of the creation of an upside down pyramid. As a conclusion people should "start to feel more" and ignore everything else. By so they will become more contacted with their bodies and eventually especially for martial artists to even get hold of their Hara. Probably many Senseis, including mine, have said to their students; "I can only show and explain you have it can be done, but I can't jump into your body and do it for you. You have to feel it and do it yourself." A persons' discover and use of his Hara would be one of these "you have to feel it and do it yourself" moments.

*"To feel is to understand"*

## *Hara in Karate*

Alright, now that the science and spiritual part of Hara has been dealt with, it's time to open what kind of role Hara plays in karate.

In karate Hara actually has pretty huge role for a person to fully express his abilities at the highest level. During the classes Hara will usually be described in the meaning of lowering a bodyweight (from the Hara) in order to have more stable steps and rooted stances and also in the meaning of putting more power behind the blocks and strikes. It's good to realize that the center of bodyweight is in the same area as Hara is, coincidence?

Since Hara is located at the hips it can also be pretty visual to see if a person is putting his/hers Hara in the use or not. Just like any energy can be focused into some specific use so does the energy in Hara. The energy in Hara is like a small spin that is doing the circular kind of movement in forward and therefor the energy used in forward going actions are at the strongest because there won't be any distractions on the way. Now you may wonder how the energy in Hara can be applied. That can be easier understood if you think when Hara is not active and then again when it is active. For so to speak Hara can be active or passive. The passive Hara can be considered as a Butt wink. That will happen if you don't have any conscious focus trying to activate your lower body abdominal muscles in order to put the hips forward and down, this on the other hand would be the definition of active Hara. Though it's quite poorly explained that just by putting hips forward and down is all what there is needed to make the Hara to be active. So how to actually get that Hara in use in karate? First we have to break down the fact that it's not the *twisting of your hips* that has the biggest influence on developing technique effectiveness. In fact the term *twisting your hips* is often used poorly to describe what really should be happening. It's the drive from your legs to propel your hip forward, the contraction of your abs (Hara) with a proper breathing and the resulting whip effect of your arm that creates the most kinetic energy. The amount kinetic energy is what gives the *knockout power* to a technique, not so much the force of the technique. That's also a reason why there must be separation between hip and shoulder through proper application of Hara for maximum impact. In other words, it's all about the timing of your contraction of your abs to make the connection between upper and lower body. As you can see the application of Hara involves not just simply contracting the abs, but the timing and method of abdominal contraction depending on what we are doing. When receiving impact, simple *hunker down* contraction is what we are doing. When punching Hara encompasses the *timing, twisting and contraction* of your different abdominal muscles. The proper application of Hara in karate not only toughens your body and makes it more resilient to impact, but it provides the *connection between your upper and lower body*. It's the link between stance and the upper body. As the old saying goes; *"The chain is only as strong as its weakest link"*. In karate the lack of Hara is often the weakest link, which in turn translates to ineffective technique and lack of impact.

Now to the important part, how Hara can actually be trained? The short answer is

through martial arts training that develop abdominal muscles. Remember you have 6 sets of abdominal muscles, not just one. Each are used when making tension in different ways, crunching, twisting, breathing, et cetera. Sit ups, hip raises, core-strengthening exercises like *bridging or planking*, all develop abdominal strength, but remember that it is *how* and *when* you contract that is really important for proper Hara. Of course once you make the distinction between how your muscles are used for different movements, that's when you start to understand how to apply Hara correctly. For the test you might want to try to distinguish between the muscles you use for sit-ups, compared to the abdominal muscles you use for twisting, compared to the abs used when breathing, for posture and so on. To the novice it might seem like one contraction does all. But for advanced martial artist they understand that there is far more involved than just that. There are also a large number of different breathing exercises which will guide you towards right inhale – exhale cycle for the right timing of the contraction of your abdominals and there for to strengthen your Hara.

The very first step to developing Hara is active thinking about using Hara. Think about it when making basic technique from yoi. Think about the muscles you use while making oi-zuki and gyaku-zuki. Think about how you use those muscles while making transitions from one stance to another. Become aware of your breathing and the role of Hara while performing kata. A good start to discover the Hara would be getting rid of that butt wink. By squeezing the buttocks and having a “small crunch” from your abdominals the hips will go under your torso and by so it will mimic more and more the active Hara and eventually also work as one, but only if you put your mind into it and do the work. As a long term result I can guarantee that if you put Hara at the top of your list of things to improve, you’ll see that your understanding of one of the most overlooked aspects of modern karate will make massive improvements to your technique. And once you couple the physical with the emotional part you’ll have a true sense of how powerful Hara really can really be.



## PERSONAL THOUGHTS AND EXPERIENCES OF HARA

I don't really have any early memories about when I first experienced the use of my Hara. Though I can recall that during the classes our Sensei Rolf would demonstrate the correct way how to exhale quickly out and then at the same time tense the abdominal muscles so that the punches and kicks wouldn't hurt that much when the contact happened. Other memories are related to the strong use of hip movements; "Hips sideways you block and hips forward you strike". By some reason I never actually got the hook about Hara, I kind of learned the feeling without knowing what it was, maybe I just missed that part during the classes.

As the time flew and the trainings kept going I had developed some weird but in my opinion good kind of habits. For example during a challenging training session I would breathe heavily (from the Hara) in order to relax the muscles. My older Sensei Ahmed used to think that what I did was exactly opposite. He thought that I tensed my muscles though what I did wasn't that, I tried to relax myself through a heavy breathing from the bottom of my stomach. Of course my abdominals would tense but the rest of my body got a little bit more loose and relaxed, or at least that's how I felt it. Back then I didn't even know why I breathed that way, but it felt right and it gave me the "right kind of feeling". This heavy breathing happened mostly during a very hard training session and every time when I did it, it kind of felt that I got somewhat more focused and that I even got more control over my exhausted and tired body. It gave me the feeling that I could still keep on training and maintain the focus that was needed until the next break or until the end of the class. Simply said it put me in the mental state where I felt the pain but through the breathing I could ignore the fact that my muscles were burning like they would've been on fire. But to be honest at that time (age 18 - 21) I was highly motivated in practicing karate, and because of that high motivation I was willing to endure quite amount of discomfort for the better good and at that time I also discovered my heavy breathing (Hara) and its benefits.

Discovering Hara in karate has been very helpful for me but it doesn't end there. I've also realized that the use Hara has also helped me in my everyday life. I feel that the breathing through the Hara gives me more rooted emotions for the moment and also puts me in the higher level of focus and concentration. Sometimes I've busted myself doing the "heavy breathing" from the Hara when I've felt extremely stressed out and I just couldn't lose my mind during the task or whatever I had going on. Actually during my job interview for the gym, the interviewer asked me about what if the worst possible scenario would happen and the whole day would just be a one huge mess, what would I do? How would I keep myself together? And by some reason I said to him that I would do a few "karate breathes". The interviewer was a bit amused about my answer and he asked me if I wouldn't mind to demonstrate him this so called "karate breathing". Well how could have I said no? After all there was a job place on the table. So what I did was a few quick and long inhales in the bottom of my stomach from where I slowly and heavily started to breathe out. I must say that

the interviewer was quite impressed at the moment. But since it was a small room where we had the interview I think it kind of put me in the better position with the demonstration. But that karate breathing wasn't just for the show, to be honest that's what I actually do when I'm stressed out and when I need to keep it cool. The saying goes; "have a few deep breaths and it shall help you with a stressful situation", for me it's the same but I do it as mentioned in the text, from the Hara.

Hara has also been very helpful for me in the gym training. As an example about the gym training the simple planking exercise gets so much easier when you involve your breathing and focus on tensing the Hara. Your core gets rock solid and you can really feel that you are activating your whole mid-section of your body. It feels that just by the active breathing from the Hara I could anchor my focus much better during any physical exercise and again kind of fade that burning pain away. For example I've also done Hara breathings while I've been running on the treadmill and sometimes I've done it during the moment right before I've been about to perform a heavy lift with a barbell. The reason for these Hara breathings were either to maintain that focus during the exercise or to bring it so that I could be more focused for the upcoming performance. The reason why I do that is because it gives me the feeling that I'm in control over my body. The exhaustion tries to sneak in and make me give up, but with the right kind of anchoring (Hara breathing) I'm able ignore the pain and face the challenge as it is.

As a summary about "what is Hara", I have to say that it's a very complex combination of many things that can easily be undervalued and misunderstood. While I've been writing this text I've come to a conclusion that Hara is a very widely approachable concept and an idea which isn't an easy thing to open at its full meaning. For an outsider who doesn't practice any martial arts it can be quite hard to have a grasp of the idea and even for the experienced martial artist it can cause some serious confusion while trying to understand the Hara and make it work. For me it's just like they say that having a black belt is actually the beginning of the karate. That's when you should feel that you are again on the white belt because you start to realize that there are so many little details and things that actually has so huge role in karate and in your personal improvement in it. You start to doubt that are you even a black belt karateka because you start to realize that there is still so much to know and that you know so little but yet so much. For example this text that I've written and which you have now read, I know that I've covered the question "what is Hara" pretty well but then again I feel that there is so much information and facts about Hara what I haven't written about and which still could be included in the text. Maybe that's the reason why they say that karate is the way of life because you can never be ready and know too much. There is always something new to realize and improve in your karate.

And now I will finally cover the most important question about Hara. What it is to me? How I see, and feel about Hara? Quickly said, for me Hara is about bringing it alive and being presence. I love it when I can spot a real "serious" karateka and just admire how he or she brings the techniques so alive that you can actually see and feel the danger, the power and the

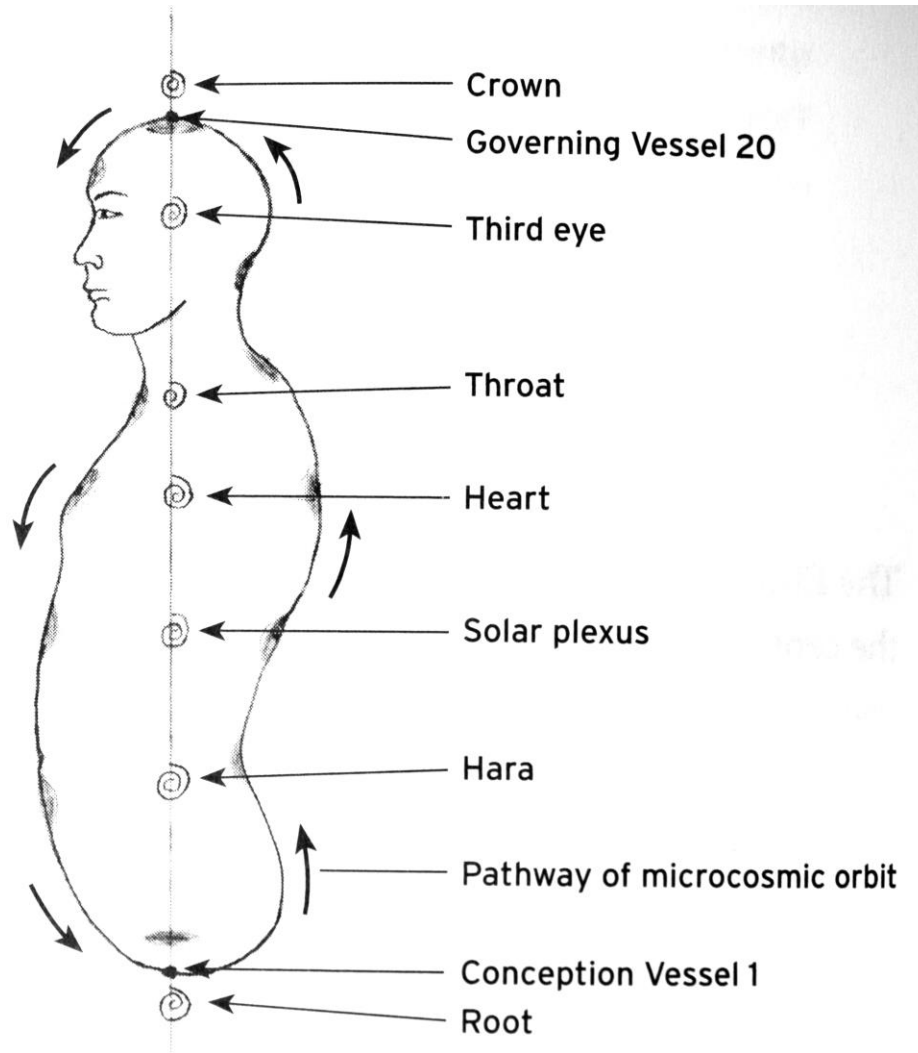
control what person has within him-or herself. That would only happen if the person has an insane amount of training hours behind of him and because of that he has managed to develop a very good control over his body and especially over his Hara. I have read from somewhere that from white belt to black belt you shape the weapons, and on the black belt you learn how to use them. That would also be a good quote for applying Hara in use. First you get the weapons ready (learn how to do the techniques) and then you learn how to use them (apply Hara in techniques). For most karatekas the weapons are ready, but they don't know how to use them. Sure they might know how to kick in the head or punch in the stomach but can they generate that "brutal power" from the Hara what is needed for the technique to really be effective and not to just look nice and fancy movement. I've started to have this idea that the body is your expression to the world, the way how you treat it and use it has so much to say for other people. And I'm not talking about being "body positive" which is a good thing, but what I'm talking about is the expression of myself through myself. Just like the artist expresses himself through the music, dancing or writing I'd also want to express myself. I feel that for me to really get my techniques alive starts by mastering the use of Hara. Hara is like a missing puzzle to open stronger me. It's like a gatekeeper that I must tame and make my own. Mastering the use of Hara is the key to stronger and better me as a martial artist. That's how I feel about Hara.

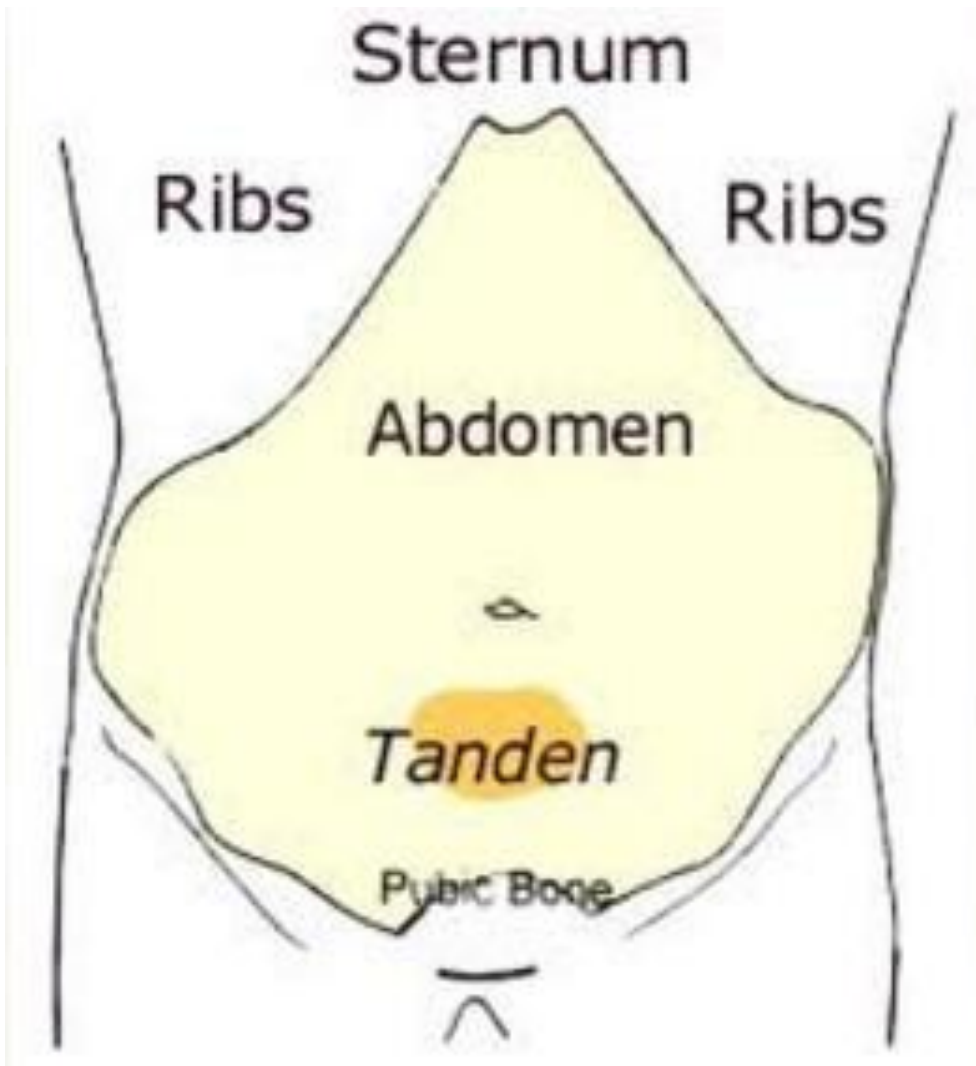
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# ILLUSTRATED PICTURES OF HARA

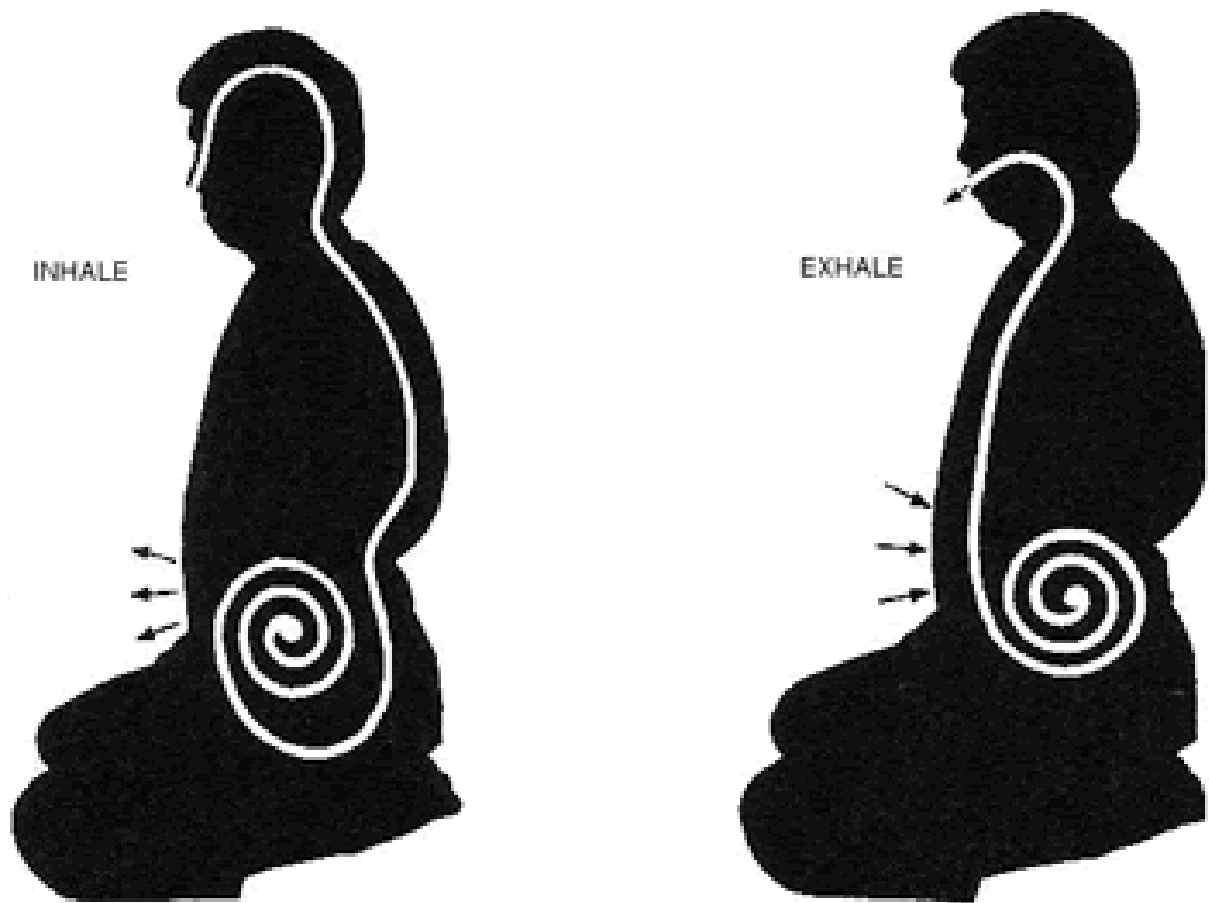
The picture shows how Hara aligns with the other "organs" in the body

Microcosmic Orbit/  
Ethereal Thread/Chakra:  
Governing Vessel 20 &  
Conception Vessel 1





The picture shows more detailed where Hara can be reached (The darkened area around Tanden).



The picture shows how breathing affects in Hara by contracting abdominal muscles and by relaxing them.



“A tree with strong roots laughs at storms.”

**20.6 – 2017**

**Lisbon - Portugal**

**For 2.DAN examination**

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