

The Role of the Internal Arts for Health Wellness and Recovery

Introduction: The Internal Arts

These are becoming better known in the West as Tai, Chi, Chi Gung and Bagua: What are they? Where are they from? How do they work? I shall give a brief lecture on the history, development and exportation from China of the Internal Arts including a demonstration.

This will be a multimodal presentation that will include knowledge and skill teaching of the following Three Principles. I shall discuss, demonstrate and show how they are fundamental to these arts and the usefulness of these principles for people in recovery.

I will make suggestions on how consumer run and mental health programs might include the internal arts as part of a spectrum of services that promotes health and healing.

The next three sections will be divided into brief lectures and demonstrations followed by much longer experiential components.

1. Abdominal Breathing

What it does; why and how it works and how to do it. Breathing is the most vital of our methods of 'fueling' ourselves; we can go without food for 4 weeks, without water for 4 days but we cannot do without air for 4 minutes. Breathing is one way that we can influence the involuntary (sympathetic nervous system) regulating blood pressure, heart rate, circulation, digestion and many other bodily functions. Abdominal Breathing is used to induce relaxation, lower blood pressure and as a sleep aid. It also helps maintain a healthy digestion and spine. The participants will experience this.

2. Internal Shower or Dissolving

What it does; why and how it works and how to do it. The 'Internal Shower' is one of the names used to describe this Internal Arts technique of deep relaxation. This is the Water Method of Taoism and involves 'feeling' through the body from top to bottom which can be highly detailed; then allowing everything that you can feel to 'dissolve' like something solid turning to water turning to air; as if you were standing in a warm shower and the water was washing 'through' you washing away all aches and pains, tensions and blockages and anything else that does not feel quiet right. The participants will experience this.

3. Slow Continuous Movement

What this is, why and how it works and how to do it. This is the principle we recognize mostly in the movements of Tai Chi and Chi Gung. It is the method for releasing the physical nerves allowing the other soft tissues to stretch and spiral as they should. I shall demonstrate the movements of Tai Chi, Chi Gung and Ba Gua and then I shall instruct the group on "Turning the Wheel Chi Gung", which is the Chi Gung exercise that was used at the Boston Medical Center with the refugees and trauma survivors.

Breathing Meditation

Breathe in and out of your nose keeping the mouth closed but relaxed. Try to keep your tongue resting lightly against the hard palette just behind the front teeth.

Breathe quietly and softly making it as effortless as possible.

Start by feeling the air as it passes through your nostrils – in and out.

Then feel the flow of the air through the nostrils and the nasal passages – in and out.

Feel the air as it passes through the nostrils, the nasal passages and down the throat - as you inhale and as you exhale.

Finally we add the most difficult task of feeling the air as it enters and leaves the lungs.

From here on when we add a new section we are feeling not just the air but the passage of the energy – the energy of the breathing – the chi of the breath. In other words the effort you body uses to breathe.

Follow all the above route trying to be fully aware of the entire passage and now add feeling the central line of the body from the base of the throat as far as the solar plexus. Again on the inhale and the exhale.

Now follow the air and the energy of the breath in the nostrils and the whole route and add the central passage as far as the navel.

Add as far as just below the navel.

Finally add as far as the pit of the abdomen, the center there we call the lower tantien.

You will feel how the abdomen is pressurized and expands with each inhale and how it relaxes and contracts with every exhale.

Please note: this process of feeling deeper and deeper into the body may take years of practice to perfect. So, do not be in any hurry to complete it. Take your time. Relax with every breath you take. Enjoy each moment of awareness.

Do not force your breathing. Let it feel perfectly natural and easy. Let it come and go. Let your attention remained relaxed. Do not struggle. There is no rush.

If you lose your place or if your attention wanders just start again with no self-recrimination. Start again, relax and let the process become one that you really enjoy.

Release to Freedom: The Dissolving Process of the Taoist Water Method

THE EMPTY VESSEL, Fall 1999 by Frank Allen & Sally Kealy

Taoist Water Method Chi Kung and Meditation gently dissolves energetic blockages on all levels of a person's being. This differentiates it from the Fire Methods which burn or blast their way through energetic blockages. The more recent Fire Methods, better known in Asia and the West, include Taoist and Buddhist practices as well as Kundalini yoga from India and Sexual Magick from the West. The Fire Methods are known for powerful practices and speedy development, but may often make casualties of careless and weak practitioners. The Water Method is a slower, gentler, less precarious path to prime physical health, a calm mind, and spiritual development.

The Taoist Fire Method practices were developed in the second century BCE within the Neo-Taoist era best exemplified by the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove. The failure of the Taoist Yellow Turban Rebellion made it necessary for Taoism to remain unnoticed by local officials. Public displays of Taoism comprised of artwork and individual practices. Taoist Water Method practices come from China's Age of Philosophers in the sixth century BCE. This was the era of Confucius and Lao Tze. Neither of their teachings had coalesced into actual schools of philosophy or organized religions, but their teachings were revered by all. Even in the midst of chaotic and warring political times, all aspects of daily life moved at a slow and steady pace, like the ox carts that moved the nation. The energetic and spiritual practices of this time period reflect this pace, and in doing so, have become the safe and gentle way to health and human evolution.

The gentle Water Method begins with a solid foundation in Chinese energy based exercises often known as chi kung, and begins with postural training. Students are taught to stand with their feet parallel and flat on the floor. The knees are bent and aligned over the feet. The hips are down and back, as if beginning to sit on a chair, and tucked a little forward to flatten the sacrum. The spine is straight and lifted upward from the crown of the skull while the chest, shoulders and abdomen relax and drop. The tongue gently touches the roof of the mouth just behind the teeth.

While standing, the practitioner breathes from the nose, using the diaphragm instead of the muscles between the ribs. This manifests externally as breathing with the low waist instead of with the upper chest. This diaphragmatic breathing becomes a continuous flow with the practitioner never holding the breath. When open, the Water Method practitioner's eyes are relaxed, allowing the images to come in and not projecting the vision out to the images. This is the Taoist concept of Yin Vision. The practitioner relaxes the mind, fighting no thoughts out and holding no thoughts in. This unbroken flow of thought matches the continuous flow of breath.

After the basics of standing practices are understood, the student begins an exercise known as What's Alive and What's Dead. Before an awakened nervous system can feel energy, it must first learn to feel flesh. The student learns to think of the entire nervous system as an extension of the brain, potentially conscious and just waiting to wake up. While standing, the student shuts off visualization, and tunes up feeling. This helps prevent the student from thinking an area has been felt, when, in fact, it was visualized. The student starts at the top of the head and attempts to feel the hair, the scalp, the skull and the places where the plates of the skull come together. The student feels as much as possible, keeping in mind that what is felt is alive, and what is not felt is dead. Hence the name of the exercise. Increment by increment the student feels his way down the body, much like visiting fifty floors of a building. At each floor the visit lasts long enough to determine what's alive and what is not. Students must be careful not to get hung up on a floor in an effort to feel everything perfectly. Nothing is perfect in life, so the student must recognize when a reasonable amount has been felt on a particular floor within that particular time period, then continue to move down to the next floor. The

exercise is only over when the student gets to the bottom floor. With each practice session, more of the student's body will become alive and aware. Long before feeling the entire inside of the body, the student will begin to become aware of energy blockages. This will lead to the next stage of development, the Outer Dissolving Process.

The Outer Dissolving practices begin with a standing exercise that is identical in external content to What's Alive and What's Dead. In this practice, called Clearing Down, the student begins by feeling the top of the aura or energy field, which emanates beyond the skin. The distance between the outer edge of the energy field and the skin indicates the overall health of the practitioner, wider bands indicating stronger health. The student is no longer simply feeling, but continuously scanning for feelings of blockage, congestion, and places that are too tight, too strong, or completely out of sync with the surroundings. These are spots of congealed energy similar to log jams that need to be broken up and used. This process begins with the student locating and feeling this block of congealed energy until it seems to be a solid shape with definable parameters. The student's mind then begins to dissolve this solid shape much like water can dissolve ice, crystalline sugar, and, in time, even rock. As the solid shape begins to dissolve into an amorphous liquid with a less definable shape much like ice becoming water or sugar becoming syrup! the student's mind begins to further dissolve the liquid, transforming it into a vapor. This is similar to water boiling away to steam. This "steam," however, is without heat, and is more akin to alcohol or gas evaporating into vapor. This vapor floats out to the edge of the student's aura where it becomes usable energy.

Feeling this dissolving process can be an extremely subtle process. Water Method teachers often give the students an idea of what to feel by having the student tighten the muscles of the hand into a fist until the knuckles become white. The student then relaxes the muscles of the hand without moving the fingers or thumb. The sensation of relaxation that slowly spreads out from the center of the palm and beyond demonstrates and mimes the feeling of the dissolving process.

At the center of each blockage lies the feeling that initially shocked the person's energy system, thereby creating the block. When the blockage is completely dissolved, this core feeling will be set loose. At this initial stage of practice, what is felt is usually a physical sensation or even an emotional feeling. This feeling must be recognized and let go. To either repress or hold on to it will re-create the blockage, and the dissolving process will have to be done all over again. Only very small blockages will be completely dissolved in one or even a few practice sessions. Most blockages will be worn down over a period of time as water wears away a rock. Some of them might even be lifetime projects. The practitioner must recognize within each practice session his own limitation at each increment of the body, and continue to move steadily down, and be sure to practice daily. The search for perfection will only cause stagnation. When the student has been working on exactly the same blockages for many practice sessions and stabilization has finally been reached, it is time to move on.

After developing the standing practices, Outer Dissolving is initiated within several practices that involve movement. Seated and lying down practices are usually reserved for the practice of Inner Dissolving. Chi kung exercises are the most common moving vehicle for Outer Dissolving. In fact, the standing dissolving practice is the first exercise in a chi kung set known as Opening the Energy Gates of Your Body.

The second exercise in the set is a variation of Cloud Hands which activates the fluids of the body. It shifts the weight to pump the blood, lowers and raises; the hip crease, and squeezes and releases the lymph nodes in that area, thereby pumping the lymphatic fluid, expanding and compressing the joints of the skeleton to pump the lubricating fluid of the joints.

The third exercise is called Swings. It is comprised of three variations of weight shifting and arm swing exercises, which include the health benefits of Cloud Hands while adding three levels of organ massage. The Clearing Down Dissolving practice can be integrated into the mental work of both these exercises. The Energy Gates set ends with a unique spinal stretch. This exercise is designed to open the spaces between each vertebrae, moving from the bottom of the spine to the top in both bending over and straightening up movements. Dissolving can be done in each of the spaces between the vertebrae.

The second chi kung set in the Water Method is called Spiraling Energy Body. In this set the practitioner learns to be able to clearly think two things simultaneously. First, the student learns to access his own secondary consciousness. The secondary consciousness is the part of the mind that can sing along with the radio while the primary consciousness carries on a conversation, for example. When the Clearing Down practice occupies the secondary consciousness, a safety ground wire is created that protects the practitioner from all kinds of energy blowout or burnout. In Spiraling Energy Body the student learns to use the primary consciousness to pump energy up through the body, and to practice External Dissolving of energy which another living being has projected toward the student. The student may also eliminate energy which has been projected outward (and thought better off!), and begin to move spiraling energy between his energy storage bank and each and every one of the energy gates in the body. Doing each of these practices, the dissolving downward ground wire within the secondary consciousness is maintained.

The third Water Method chi kung set is called Marriage of Heaven and Earth. It is a single exercise that can contain the entire Taoist Internal Power Nei Gung System. This is a sixteen part system in which all three sections of the dissolving process (outer, external, and inner) constitute only one part. The fourth set of Water Method chi kung is a method of pumping the cerebral spinal fluid and releasing power from the spine. It is called Bend the Bow and Shoot the Arrow. The fifth and final set in this chi kung system is called Gods Playing in the Clouds. Like Marriage of Heaven and Earth, it can contain the entire Taoist Nei Gung System. To this the six exercise set adds a number of twisting and coiling motions that are indigenous to the martial art called pa kua chang.

The martial arts pa kua chang and tai chi chuan also serve as moving vehicles that can carry the Dissolving Process. Tai chi dissolving practices specialize in dissolving through specific patterns of organs and glands. The unique dissolving practices of pa kua chang involve dissolving from the edges of the body into the center and back again. Dissolving in the adrenal glands during fighting practices helps to remove unconscious reaction, fear and hesitation. Similarly, dissolving in the gonads during sexual practices can help eliminate hormonal drive for completion and serve to lengthen the process.

The Outer Dissolving practices help remove block ages from the Physical Energy Body, the energy in the flesh that enlivens it. It also removes blockages from the Chi Energy Body, the energy that runs in channels through the flesh and emanates from the flesh to the aura level. These are the first two layers of the Eight Energy Bodies, which in Taoist belief are the outwardly expanding energy bodies that comprise a human being. The others are the Emotional Energy Body, Thinking Energy Body, Psychic Energy Body, Causal Energy Body, Energy Body of Individuality, and Energy Body of Tao. The Energy Body of Tao is a person's connection to everything else, and is usually accessed only after the Physical Energy Body has been left behind. This means that the average person only accesses seven energy bodies at a time, leaving only enlightened masters with the ability to access all eight bodies at once.

The Outer Dissolving Practices of chi kung releases the congested chi in the body and its direct energy power system, and allows the body to utilize this energy, resulting in freedom from weakness and poor health.

When the Dissolving Process is moved into the third Emotional Energy Body, the practices enter the realm of meditation and leave the work of chi kung. The Emotional Energy Body stretches from a person's center outward to the stars that can be seen with the naked eye. The other five bodies extend even farther outward and are rarely accessed without the presence of a Taoist Master. The emotional layer can be reached quite easily after the Outer Dissolving practices have been stabilized.

"Meditation is that which puts the individual in touch with the Infinite," states Taoist Master B.K. Frantzis. Accessing and feeling the Emotional Energy Body falls within this definition of meditation. Frantzis is the master who brought the Water Method to the West. His story is the classical tale of hard to soft: a young fighter who became a master of healing and meditation. Bruce K. Frantzis began to study martial arts at the tender age of twelve, having been highly impressed and more than a bit frightened after seeing a deadly New York street encounter. Being an extremely bright lad, Frantzis eagerly sought out and studied the healing arts that helped him recuperate from sparring injuries, and studied meditation to remove fear and hesitation from his sparring. By the time he graduated from high school, Frantzis had black belts in karate, judo, and aikido and introductions to external and internal Chinese kung fu.

While attending college in Japan, Frantzis re-earned all his black belts in the best Japanese schools and fought on an "All Japan" championship collegiate karate team. He also continued his studies in shiatsu massage and Zen meditation. During his senior year and after college, Frantzis began to travel to the island of Taiwan to study the Internal Martial Arts of pa kua chang, tai chi chuan, and hsing i chuan. He also began to study tui na/Chinese energy massage and Taoist meditation. In the early 1970s, Frantzis also spent the better part of two years studying Pranayama and Kundalini yoga in India. In the late 1970s, he began to travel to the island city of Hong Kong to study with one of the highest level masters of Yang Family tai chi chuan.

While in Hong Kong, Frantzis met and began to study with a young Internal Arts Master who had emigrated from Beijing. This young master, named Bai Wa, was the only student of Liu Hung Chieh, one of the last of the great Taoist Masters. Liu was the last member of the original Beijing Pa Kua School; a winning entrant in the 1928 All China Full Contact Tournament. Liu was a personal friend and private student of the founder of Wu Style Tai Chi. He was also the leader of a Northern Chinese Taoist Sect, and a formally declared Enlightened Being. Bai Wa studied pa kua, hsing i chuan, and Fire Method chi kung and meditation from Liu during his teen years in Beijing.

In 1981 Bruce Kumar Frantzis traveled to Beijing for instructor training in the 24 Posture Yang Style Tai Chi Form at the National Sports Institute. He carried with him an introduction to Liu from Bai Wa, but this did not mean that the old master would agree to teach him, having not taught anyone since Bai Wa. Strangely, the night before Frantzis arrived at Liu's door, the old man dreamed of a Westerner coming to learn from him. The dream and the introduction compelled Liu to make Frantzis the second and only student since the 1930s. Liu decided that this large, young kung fu fighter needed to learn the gentle water method of chi kung and meditation, along with the highest levels of the internal martial arts. Frantzis studied with Liu for a few months, then returned to America.

In 1983 Frantzis returned to Beijing, where he worked in a hospital as a tui na therapist to cancer patients and continued to study with Liu on a daily basis. The old master grew so fond of this determined young American that he adopted Bruce Kumar Frantzis into his family and also made him a lineage holder in pa kua, hsing i, wu style tai chi, and Taoist Water Method chi kung and meditation. When Liu Hung Chieh passed away in December 1986, Frantzis returned to the United States and began to spread Liu's teachings. From his home base in Fairfax, California, Taoist Master Frantzis teaches workshops, seminars, and retreats across America as well as in Western Europe. He

has also produced a series of videotapes, and has written books on the Internal Martial Arts and Taoist Water Method chi kung and meditation.

Taoist Water Method meditation deals with stillness and inner space and is mostly practiced in a variety of seated postures both on the floor and on chairs. The beginning practice which is akin to What's Alive and What's Dead in Chi Kung, is Following the Breath to Calm the Monkey Mind. This practice recognizes that the mind often hops from thought to thought without even finishing most of them, like the hopping of an agitated monkey. By concentrating the mind on feeling the breath as it enters and leaves the body, the mind begins to slow down and any remaining thoughts begin to drift to the edges of consciousness and begin to eventually disappear. This creates an unbroken thread of consciousness that begins to still the mind. The Water Method meditation practitioner must develop an experiential grasp of the vast amount of space that resides within the central energy channel. This inner space reaches to a vastness equal to the outer reaches of the universe. Inner stillness is reached when a calm mind accesses the vastness of inner space within the central channel.

The Inner Dissolving Process of Water Method meditation consists of the conscious use of inner space. When blockages of emotional energy are dissolved, the process becomes solid to liquid to vapor, which then implodes into inner space instead of floating outward as in the Outer Dissolving Process. Emotional blockages are smoother and more subtle than physical and chi blockages. It takes a highly awakened nervous system to detect them. Emotional blockages dissolve away in layers, like peeling an onion and unlike the steady wearing away of water on rock, which is the process of Outer Dissolving. Each of these emotional layers must be liquefied, vaporized, and imploded into one's inner space. As with outer blockages, only the tiniest of emotional blockages will be totally dissolved in one session. Most of them will slowly peel away, layer by layer, session by session. The body can be generally scanned for emotional blockages, or specific emotions can be targeted and specific body areas can be scanned. When the emotional shock which is at the center of the blockage and is responsible for the blockage is released, a powerful rush or blast of the emotion is produced. Special care must be taken to see that this rush of emotion is neither repressed nor dramatized but, rather simply recognized and released. Only this will free and release the practitioner from the shock and the resulting emotional energy blockage. Water Method practitioners must realize that positive emotions may also arrive in shocking doses and create their own energy blockages. These positive emotional blockages must also be found and dissolved.

Emotional Energy Body blockages are literally a person's emotional buttons. When pushed by an ad, word or thought, these buttons trigger an instinctive emotional outburst. It is these emotional blockages and the stimulation of them which drag many people through a life of reactive behavior, a life that is never quite in control, and often consists of bouncing from one emotional reaction to the next. By lessening and removing these blockages of emotional energy, the Inner Dissolving Process releases a person from a life of reactive behavior and gives the freedom for clear, spontaneous action without residual guilt, shame, or merit.

There are periods in a person's life when the shock of loss and/or pain becomes overwhelming. Times of contracting a serious illness, having a serious injury, the loss of a loved one or home, as well as the loss of employment may drive a person into depression, inactivity, and overall stagnation. Ancient Taoist Water Method Masters taught that through the use of the Inner Dissolving Process the intensely shocking time periods of a person's life can be transformed into stages of great personal evolution. Dissolving practices that are practiced during times of shock will accomplish amounts of clearing within a couple of weeks that may take years of meditation during calm periods of a person's life. The Inner Dissolving Process can release a person from the anxiety of emotional shock, and bring him or her freedom from long-term trauma.

When a student has become familiar with the personal practices of the Dissolving Process, the two person variations are learned. Most of these practices use a dissolving loop which travels down the practitioner, loops under and up through the partner/opponent, around the top, and back down again. A few other patterns may be used in certain martial and sexual practices. The most common method of practicing the Two Person Dissolving Loop is during the practice of various slow motion martial arts practices of tai chi's pushing hands exercise, pa kua's soft hands exercise, and the various slow sparring exercises of free fighting. When applied to sexual practices, the Inner Dissolving Two Person Loop can help to dissolve the emotional triggers which cause many differences within a relationship. With this method, a partner may work on one's own blockages, and also help those of the partner, and vice versa. The Two Person Dissolving Loop can be used in martial arts to find an opponent's weaknesses, and to read every nuance of their energy flow before they manifest into physical action. The Two Person Dissolving Loop is also extremely useful in grief management. When a partner is overwhelmed with grief, the practitioner can use the Two Person Loop to help the partner dissolve the overwhelming grief while being sure not to absorb any of it.

The Taoist Water Method Dissolving Practices give the practitioner practical techniques to work on balancing all aspect of life. This is the major goal of all schools of Taoism. Being released from reactive triggers, and allowing energy to freely flow, the Dissolving Practices bring the practitioner to freedom from imbalance.

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INNER DISSOLVING

Relationship between Mind and Blockage

In the dissolving process, how does your mind contact and then dissolve the tension or blockage in your body, regardless of how dense or subtle that blockage is? In other words, how can you deliberately contact, become aware of and feel the blockages in your body with your mind only? People with normal nerves will feel pain if you hit them forcefully in a sensitive body part. Sometime later, they will feel the "blockages" inside their body as a throbbing pain. Likewise, a person can be erotically stimulated in a sensitive spot and feel pleasure. In strong emotional situations, such as falling in love, experiencing the death of someone close, or being frustrated with situations beyond your control, you can consciously feel your emotions, positive or negative. With a little bit of concentrated "mind effort," you can increase, decrease or mitigate your physical pain, pleasure or emotions. In short, you can indeed feel what happens inside you with your mind. In externally induced situations, such as those just described, your whole mind, instead of being diffused, concentrates, and all your attention is drawn to the "object" at hand be it pain, pleasure or emotion. The totality of your awareness, "the subjective observer," is directed at this object. For instance, consider a baby that has fallen down some stairs and has real pain from a physical injury that would normally keep it crying for ten to fifteen minutes. The baby's mind is fully focused on the pain. Every parent knows that if you can distract the baby with something more absorbing than the pain, the baby's attention can be diverted to a new "object," such as a favorite food or a toy. Chances are that the baby will stop crying and focus on the new object. If, in a few minutes, you withdraw the item, the baby will again feel the pain from the fall and will often begin crying anew. Where did the pain from the fall go, and from where did it return? The answer is that the pain went nowhere, the baby's mind did. It takes a certain minimum percentage of your mind's capacity to be consciously aware of anything. In dissolving a blockage, your recognition or interpretation of what you are observing, along with your feelings, is affecting you, the "observer." By going deeper and deeper inside the blockage toward its source, your mind moves further away from the original surface point of contact with the blockage. Now, how does your mind enter into and resolve the blockage in the first place?

How to Dissolve Inwardly

To an extremely limited extent, a very minimal dissolving of blockages can occur by concentrating our normal intent and awareness on them in a relaxed way. For truly effective dissolving to occur, however, both the mindstream and presence must be involved. Presence is a specific felt quality that occurs when all (or almost all) of your awareness is fully operational. This presence can be directed at an internal task (such as inner dissolving). When this quality is fully embodied in a person, it naturally exudes outward, affecting others within his or her field; it is this quality that is referred to when we speak of a person "having great presence." The internal groundwork for recognizing the mindstream, the motion of the mind, and presence, and for working with these three distinct phenomena, is developed during the preparatory practices. Likewise, the preparatory practices generate the internal mental environment necessary for that "wonderful accident" that allows practitioners direct contact with Universal Consciousness itself. In order to do the beginning outer dissolving practices, which involve only the first two energetic bodies (the physical and the chi), there is no need to recognize the motion of the mind or the mindstream. Again, pure intent will do some small bit of dissolving on its own, but the application of the mindstream and presence is needed for true effectiveness and acceleration of the inner dissolving process. A critical point for doing all the dissolving practices-

especially inner dissolving-is the quality of mind that a practitioner must maintain. Normally in the West when one wishes to concentrate to the utmost, one narrows the focus of his or her mind in a forceful, laserlike manner, which usually creates extreme tension. The inner dissolving practice, in contrast, involves a seeming paradox: you must be continuously highly focused and yet completely relaxed. Your mind releases its strength and opens to maintain the relaxed concentration that lies at the root of Taoist meditation.

This focused yet relaxed state of mind is fundamental and highly valued in both Taoist and Buddhist meditation practices. These two traditions use different metaphors to describe essentially the same point. The Taoists talk about a stone moving through water. The mind is the water: soft, yet capable of moving slowly and calmly or with great turbulence. The stone is the object of your concentration, which the water surrounds. The stone may sink slowly and gradually without obstacle, or be moved up, down, or sideways, depending on the currents that naturally arise.

Shakyamuni Buddha, the story goes, had a talented student who had been a famous musician before devoting his life to meditation. Although he worked immensely hard, the student was not able to penetrate to the depths of his being. When he asked the Buddha what was missing in his practice, the Buddha said he had to tune his mind like a string on his instrument: too loose (too relaxed) and no sound can be made (you might fall asleep), too tight and all you get is a dissonant jangle.

Stage 1. Preparation for Dissolving: Let Your Mind Relax and Settle

In the following pages, the numbered points are instructional, and the bulleted points are suggestions or explanations of more subtle material.

1. Have the intent to do the dissolving process. Volitional intent will predispose, rather than directly cause, your mindstream to move toward your blockages.
2. Sit down. It is recommended that the inner dissolving process be done sitting, the outer dissolving process standing.
3. Settle or relax your mind as much as possible.
4. While the mind is settling, your nerves may (and eventually should) begin to relax and your mind should slow down. Your conscious awareness, which is frequently fuzzy or scattered, begins to become more clear and focused. Because your mind or thoughts slow down, the motion of the mind itself begins to slow down, too, thus showing itself more easily and allowing you to recognize or feel a sense of it.
5. Gently focus attention to the act of moving your mind (that is, your conscious awareness) to the top of your head.
6. Wait until your mind begins to move of its own accord to the crown of your head.
7. Once your total mind focuses at the crown of your head, a generalized feeling of the mind expanding, a feeling that is different from your normal state of conscious awareness, should emerge.
8. Feel the sense of the motion of the mind that should now begin to arise.

** This motion, whether fast or slow, never ceases. It may be smooth and comfortable or rough and at odds with relaxation. Thoughts, ideas, and sensations continuously arise naturally owing to the subliminal content of the mind. Or if there are no discernible thoughts, there is an underlying sense that they are dormant, just below the surface, and sooner or later will manifest as recognizable ideas or feelings.

9. When the ever-growing presence and awareness of the motion of the mind grows sufficiently inside, you become aware of your individual mindstream, which is quite a different thing from the motion of the mind.

** The mindstream is like the airstream beneath an airplane, which supports the craft in flight, or it can be viewed as the road upon which the motion of the mind rides. The mindstream is the bridge, the connection, between your own ability to be aware and the universal all-pervasive Consciousness itself. The mindstream, as experienced internally, has a particular vibratory feel. It will seem to feel less dense than the motion of the mind and denser than Consciousness itself.

10. Maintaining your intent at the crown of your head, you now wait until two things happen: your mind-stream moves toward the crown of your head of its own accord, and your mindstream and your intent begin to commingle.

Stage 2. The Mindstream Reaches the Blockage

1. Beginning from the crown of your head, or the point at which you want to start the dissolving process (which may be above your head at the boundary of your etheric body), move your awareness downward through your body until you first encounter and feel a blockage.

** A blockage is some kind of congealed chi, an uncomfortable or dissonant "something" that is disturbed within the motion of the mind and obstructs some part of it. Blockages can be felt both in the physical body and in the etheric body above your head. If no blockage is present, or if you can't feel one, the motion of the mind will simply continue to move unimpeded.

2. Let your intention to dissolve remain, whether it is subtle or overt.

3. Wait for the mindstream and intention, which are separate, to commingle.

** During the rest of the movement toward emptiness and Consciousness itself, the two will remain commingled like the interplay between a singer (your individualized intent) and the band (mindstream). At different times, either may be a little or dramatically louder or softer, both may be equal, or one, although still present, may be virtually inaudible, while the other is loud and completely dominates.

Always, however, there will be a flux or flow between your conscious intent, aiding or focusing the ice-water-space process and your felt sense of the mindstream being the primary or sole agent doing the dissolving.

Stage 3. The Mindstream First Enters the Blockage at a Given Point and Begins the Dissolving Process: Ice to Water

At first, the blockage subjectively seems to be something different from you, a foreign object lodged in your awareness but seeming to be some distance from you, even though it is in your mind/body.

1. As your mind moves downward, put your intent on the first place where you feel a sensation of blockage. This is an entry point to the whole blockage but is also a block itself. As the nature of the blockage is holographic, the whole is contained in all of its parts, or points, and all of its points are linked throughout all of your energy bodies. Simultaneously watch the motion of the mind, until the motion of the mind reaches the blockage and you begin to feel it.*

2. Wait actively until you feel your presence grow, and until your mindstream and your intent join. You want your focus and clarity to grow. Do not succumb to the temptation to get drowsy and nod off.

3. Focus your intent on allowing the blocked energy at that point to turn from "ice" to "water."

** As your presence grows, your awareness of the energetic quality and contours of the block grows along with it.

** From the beginning, in both the inner and outer dissolving practices, focus on the energy you feel behind (underlying) the blockage more than on the energy of the blockage itself, and on the flow of where the mindstream is going, not just on where it is at any given time.

** The growth of your presence further empowers the mindstream to follow your intent and enter the first layer of the blockage at a given point, until the blocked energy there merges with the mindstream, much as an iceberg eventually turns to liquid and merges with the sea.

** The mindstream and your intent become completely commingled. The addition of the mindstream gradually accelerates the inner dissolving process.

Stage 4. The Mindstream Continues Dissolving the First Layer at the Point of Entry of the Blockage: Water to Inner Space

1. Release all the remaining blocked content of your felt sensations by imploding your energy into the inner space that your previously condensed blocked energy shape occupied, thereby converting your blocked energy into Consciousness without content (a stage of emptiness).

2. Let your dissolved energy open a door into a door within a door, leading deeper and deeper into inner space in the point at which you began dissolving. You implode each layer of energy inward into the point however far it extends internally, until you finally reach a place where your being naturally comes to a stop (see p. 97).

** At this time your intent becomes subordinate to the mindstream, which completely dissipates the energy of the blockage inside your body into inner space, and ideally into emptiness. This process completes the first layer of dissolving your entry point: water to inner space. You may be successful or not-see stage 5.

** As the releasing of a layer of the point accelerates, the sense of the mindstream can in the beginning (and usually does when you are more experienced)

The inner Dissolving process become clearer and clearer. When a layer of the point where you are holding your awareness fully releases into emptiness, it becomes possible to become aware of the mindstream and the motion of the mind as two clearly differentiated elements connected to your Consciousness, completely separate and yet not intrinsically different, merely different densities of the same parent material.

** Remember that the mindstream is connected to all, not some, parts of your being simultaneously. You can enter into the mindstream from any part of your body, mind, or spirit. There is no true linear sequence of A to B to C when releasing layers of a point into inner space.

3. As you move and dissolve into inner space, stay grounded in the background of your awareness by continuously remaining conscious of your entire physical body. Don't lose a sense of contact with your physical body and go into a purely mental realm. Continue to dissolve inward into the point at which you entered the blockage, as you simultaneously let yourself experience the dissolving of any associated energies that arise.

** Any blockage located by the inner dissolving process, anywhere in your body, is linked via the mindstream to any other related blockage at any number of points of entry. Any related blockage could be at another point in your physical body or in any of your other energy bodies, and it could either maintain or intensify the effect of the primary blockage. You may temporarily find yourself in such related blockages as you dissolve a layer of the primary blockage. Move with the mindstream but hold some core awareness of the primary blockage as well.

** Some blockages you may encounter will not be extensively linked to other parts of your being; others may be directly or tangentially linked to thousands of other subsidiary blockages. Some compose core parts of your individual personality or the underlying assumptions and expectations that make up your worldview, that is, how you experience the world you live in.

** Do not confuse the jumping from place to place of the "monkey mind" with the motion of the mind that guides the mindstream to the next linked blockage.

** Your mindstream is like a golden thread simultaneously present in all your energetic bodies, and can, in a microsecond, move between your various energy bodies—from lower to higher and higher to lower. A given energetic blockage could have infinite tributaries (a door within a door within a door) that ultimately lead to a single ocean, where all dissolve. Because of this circumstance and because the motion of mind also has similar properties to the mindstream, your awareness could stay for a considerable time dissolving any specific single place. Or it could skip forward along different tributaries, dissolving and resolving smaller or larger fragments of bound energy, which are directly relevant to the original blockage and must also be resolved in order for the original blockage to be fully released. This movement could be between different energy bodies, causing the practitioner to have successively different internal experiences. As mentioned, all of this can be simultaneously occurring from the one blocked point you are dissolving.

Stage 5. Dissolving All the Successive Layers within a Given Point of Entry and All Other Points at the Same Height of Your Body within a Blockage

1. When you attempt to dissolve a point in a blockage through the first layer of inner space, there are a few possible outcomes:

(a) You are unable to dissolve to a stage of emptiness, and therefore the point of energy is not resolved to a conclusion. Rather, it feels as though it will stay unresolved no matter how long you try to dissolve it. In this case, go to step 2.

(b) You are able to dissolve through the first layer of inner space into a sense of emptiness. You stay in emptiness as long as it lasts. After a while some sense of agitation or additional blocked energy will re-emerge in the same blocked place (which will feel larger than it was, as though you have gone through a door into a larger chamber of your mind). This is a new layer of inner space. The mindstream then follows your intent and the motion of the mind inward again. The mind attempts to dissolve into that layer and resolve it into emptiness. You now dissolve the new larger sense of blocked energy, maintaining the same relationships between motion of the mind, presence, mindstream, intent, and Consciousness itself. If unsuccessful, go to step 2. If successful, wait again for the next layer to arise, and repeat this process.

** Between the resolution of each layer of the blockage and its next layer will be a resting space where people often feel extremely blissful and at ease with themselves and with creation. This space is where the motion of the mind and the mindstream first make themselves known to your conscious awareness with regularity.

The mindstream and the motion of the mind are usually recognized in one of three forms: specific subtle yet discernible feelings, a level of vibration, or some quality of light.

(c) After successfully dissolving one or more layers of inner space at a point of entry, you may find, after waiting there, that you sense you have achieved resolution into a final emptiness. Feel whether this resolution has also removed any sense of the blockage. If so, go to step 3. If not, go to step 2.

2. Transfer any unresolved energy from the original blocked point to the next blocked point at the same height but in front of, behind, or to either side of the original point of entry. If none exists because the blockage has shrunk or moved down, then move down to the next point of entry you can find. Then go back to stage 2 on page 102, and begin again.

** If you try several points of entry and are unable to resolve any to even a first layer of emptiness, then go to step 3 below. If you cannot get access to a blockage, you cannot use its energy to move into emptiness.

3. With your intent, the motion of the mind, presence, and the mindstream, simply go to the next place down your body where you feel a new blockage and begin all over again.

** Whether you are a beginner or an advanced practitioner, when dissolving (using either the inner or outer process) you move only downward from total blockage to total blockage to ensure that your body's energy channels can handle the energetic load without damage to your central nervous system, that is, damage from whatever energies may be released from your blockages. Dissolving downward is a safety procedure, pure and simple (see Question 10 in Appendix C).

1. Slowly move your intent down your body from the point into which you have been dissolving your lower tantien.

2. Along the way, take a moment to lightly and quickly dissolve inward at any remaining blockages you may feel.

3. Finally, spend a few minutes dissolving into the lower tantien.

This wrap-up process will help bring energy down your body into your lower tantien, helping center you before stopping. The lower tantien is linked to all points in your physical body. This process will help strengthen those links.

Experiences Often Encountered while Resolving the Successive Layers of a Blockage

In any form of meditation, there is no way to state exactly what experiences an individual will encounter. It would be a mistake to think that "this or that should happen to me," or "I am failing if it does not happen to me." There is simply too much individual variation, which is why teachers are very helpful to sort out your personal specifics from the general points that would be relevant to any individual. Here an attempt is made to indicate what is within normal parameters at progressively more advanced stages.

The ice-to-water and water-to-space stages of inner dissolving should be considered as a continuum rather than two completely separate processes.

Ice-to-Water Stage of the Inner Dissolving Process.

1. Feel and observe a blockage.

2. The mindstream contacts the blockage and you have a felt sense of something, possibly a type of vibration or even in relatively rare cases a full-bore vision. Or you start getting various kinds of conceptual ideas, including mental forms or interpretations of what the feelings mean or to what they are specifically connected: for example, physical problems, energetic imbalances or emotional situations involving parents, relationships, anger, depression, or self-image.

3. Dissolve the initial point of entry. Dissolve through the onion layers of the blockage one by one. How many layers you will eventually go through until a complete resolution occurs, no one can say. What can be said is this: The cause or causes of the original blockage as you continue dissolving will work their way through each of the energetic permutations that are in some way connected to the blockage. The sense of energy within the mindstream may change, getting stronger, weaker, faster, or slower, but no matter what the change, the underlying "something" (the "form") that allowed you to recognize it in the first place will usually remain until it is dissolved. The subtle quality of the vibration will change to some degree as you move through each stage of emptiness and a new buildup to another resolution. As you unbind more and more blocked energy and you become involved with the energetic form of the blockage, it is not unusual to begin to spontaneously recognize and interpret emotional and mental meanings related to what you are experiencing while dissolving. This recognition often results in a variety of spontaneously arising insights into the events of your life and the workings of your interior world. When these perceptions occur, it directly indicates that you are working on the third and fourth energetic bodies—the emotional and mental.

4. The overt vibrational form may vanish, leaving only a very subtle vibration or only the faintest hint

of what the blockage means in all its subtle aspects. Once the form disappears, over time, its charge goes and the form of the blockage seems as though it was never there. For example, if you had physical pain from a broken bone, the sense of the bone itself in that blockage would go away. You would be left only with the essence of what the broken bone meant to you, in all of its shadings and interconnections. If your blockage was emotional and related to a situation or person (such as a parent, lover, friend, or enemy), the sense of the specific situation or person would drop away and only the essence of what that emotion meant to you would be left. If it was a thought, the form of the thought, the specific ideas the mind had focused on and recognized, would drop, and only the underlying meaning would remain when you moved into emptiness. If any of these occur, it indicates that you are working on your fourth and fifth energetic bodies, the mental and psychic. From the Taoist perspective, you are now on the boundary between secular and spiritual life. For most people, going as far as dropping the form in the inner dissolving process is more than enough to relieve many of life's physical, mental, and emotional problems. From this point forward, you are now moving into what could be called intermediate/advanced spiritual work, which is extremely challenging. Up to now, your main interest could have been to simply get your inner physical, energetic, emotional, and mental life to work. From here on, the motivation behind your practice must be a sincere interest in spirituality.

5. Continue dissolving to the next stage of practice. Here the meaning of a blockage and all your interpretations drop. The meaning becomes pure energy without being attached to interpretations or judgments as to what should or should not be. When this process occurs, it indicates that you are working on your fifth energetic (psychic) body. What remains, however, is a clear sense of the self, the "I" that is observing this process.

6. Now dissolve this sense of self, the "I," until there is only an underlying vibration without a clear sense of any difference between the vibration and yourself. Dissolving the sense of the "I" is not easy and requires a great deal of sensitivity and relaxed focus. At this level, the volume of subtle distractions that take you away from dissolving seems to expand exponentially. Working at this level does not mean you are transcending your "ego"; however, it is a definite step in the right direction. Taoist meditators consider the dropping of the "I" to be the true beginning of entering the final stage of moving into the personal connection to Consciousness itself.

At this point, it is not unusual for you to start experiencing some level of inner light—not a light you purposely visualize but one that spontaneously arises when enough obstacles are removed between your normal awareness and Universal Consciousness. When this experience occurs, it indicates that you are beginning to work on your sixth (causal) energetic body. What remains, however, is the underlying core of the blockage.

7. In this next plateau, you dissolve the underlying subtle vibration or sense of light that remains after the sense of the gross "I" drops away. This sense will be very clear, and it will be a real challenge to dissolve it into emptiness. At this juncture, the veils between where you are and the full resolution of the blockage will come, one after another, each one being more subtle and difficult to dissolve than the one before. When this situation occurs, it indicates that you are working further into your sixth (causal) energetic body.

8. You have now achieved a complete sense of emptiness, and your inner world is becoming more and more still. The next plateau is exceptionally difficult. It usually takes some time before your sensitivity can adjust sufficiently to working with it well. There are myriad energetic veils between the initial sense of emptiness and Consciousness, each one more subtle than the last. As you clear out the

veils one by one, you begin to get glimpses of Consciousness. It is as though there is a light bulb with hundreds of layers of gossamer over it. When enough layers disappear, even if just for a second, you see some light, no matter how obscured. As more veils fall away, as more of your internal content loses its charge, you view Consciousness through fewer and fewer filters. Eventually your mind becomes yet more still and you start experiencing Consciousness in a "now you see it, now you don't" fashion. In the beginning, you glimpse a little, then wait a long time for the next peek. Gradually, the gaps shorten and you become increasingly familiar with Consciousness. When you gain the awareness, it indicates that you are working yet more deeply into your sixth (causal) energetic body and are on the border between the sixth body and the seventh (the body of individuality).

9. In the next phase, your mind finally becomes still and the barriers between your normal awareness and Consciousness dissolve away in every single blockage simultaneously, as you enter into the Great Stillness. You become aware of Consciousness as a living entity that becomes a lifelong companion. Meditation must be continued, however, or more "red dust" will collect, again creating veils that have to be dissolved in order for you to be aware of Consciousness effortlessly and at all times. You have now moved into the seventh body and are ready to begin working with it. An individual who has come this far-to the Great Stillness-has completed the intermediate stage of Taoist meditation and is prepared to learn inner alchemy. When you dissolve your content, two things happen:

(1) The emotional and psychic forces inside you become resolved

(2) The hidden and beneficial qualities of Consciousness it self are released so that they permeate the entire structure of your being, as opposed to merely causing a fleeting experience. Something inside you shifts and stays, never to go back. To whatever depth you have penetrated your physical or "psychic knot" (yogic terminology), when you have reached absorption (fully dissolved and relaxed it), you will gain "knowledge of it" (yogic terminology). This knowledge will naturally bring insights into that object, such as its intrinsic nature, where it comes from, the mechanisms of how it interacts and changes under various conditions and stimuli. Ultimately, at the successful conclusion of the samadhi /absorption or ice-to-space process, you achieve freedom from all the energetic and psychic attachments that bind and torture your body, mind, and soul/consciousness. With that freedom comes a release that allows your body, mind, and Consciousness to be totally at ease and comfortable, imbued with a spontaneously arising natural sense of inner stillness, quiet, peace, and joy. The less of your mind you can use, the less ability you have to remain consciously focused on an object of your intentions. This procedure requires a relaxed strength of mind. The strength of mind to concentrate on an object (internal or external) can be likened to the strength needed to lift a weight. To be able to focus on your chi, one hundred units; emotions, one thousand; mental, ten thousand; psychic, one hundred thousand; and causal, one million. As a first step, your mindstream must have the strength to "lock onto" an object with continuous concentration. Metaphorical weight lifting that progressively develops your concentration through repetition and habit. Each time you practice, mental strength (that is, the percentage of your mind devoted to the concentration) increases. Many people's minds are simply fragmented, with many things going on at the same time. This weakens their capacity to pay attention to one thing to the exclusion of all others for a set period of time. In Zen, this ability is called one-pointed concentration. In sports and science it is called focus. Successful people usually have focus and mediocre people usually do not. A major purpose of all classical education from ancient Greece to today was to develop a mind that had the capacity to concentrate and reflect.

Later you start to work with your other five energy bodies and the energy outside your body. The Taoists found that what happens inside you correlates directly with the universe outside your physical

body. As you clear your chi by going inside, you can also clear your chi on the outside, as it extends outside your physical form from just a few feet to over one hundred feet. When the chi is bound inside your body, it also is correspondingly bound outside your skin. As far as your awareness can go into inner space, it can go that far outside your body. Since our chi and emotions can be blocked both internally and externally, it is possible to dissolve your chi and emotions inside and outside your physical body simultaneously. If you do not clear out your own energy fields beyond your body, then all energies coming from an external environment can activate the unresolved energies in your own personal chi. In guitar playing, plucking one guitar string can induce a sympathetic vibration in another guitar string, with which it is not in physical contact. In like manner, an energetic frequency from outside your body can intensely activate a specific energy inside your body that would normally have remained inert or dormant. Your specific internal energy thus becomes active with respect to the specific events of your life occurring at the moment and makes a great deal of emotional noise. This reaction can cause you to be somewhat manipulated (as if you were a puppet) by the energy emanating from the huge chi fields of the stars.

Astrology is based on such energetic interactions. The immensely strong energetic fields of the planets exert an ever-changing influence on the earth as they move through space. Such influence does not mean that events will necessarily occur, but it suggests that certain types of energy will be prevailing at a particular time, affecting the first six of your eight bodies. Astrological influences can be overridden by clearing out blockages in your emotional body. Such clearing can be accomplished while sitting or while practicing tai chi chuan, ba gua, chi gung, or Taoist yoga. When you start clearing your emotional blockages it is important to tap directly into your glandular system, as well as into your internal organs. There are so many techniques available that the right one to be employed at any time depends on what is appropriate for a particular type of person or a certain situation. It is not really useful simply to talk about this or that technique in a cookbook approach. Human beings are too complicated to work that way. Taoist thought holds that a woman's heart center, or middle tantien, is naturally more alive and activated than a man's; correspondingly, a man's lower tantien is naturally more activated than a woman's. The heart center is ruler of human emotions; the lower tantien governs physicality. A woman's sexual energy concentrates in the lower, yin part of her body—that is, her feet, ankles, knees, thighs, and buttocks. Regardless of which sexual foreplay or dissolving technique is used, the lower portion of her body is where the man must physically and energetically turn her on and keep her turned on before and during sexual intercourse. The more intensely the energy accumulates in a woman's feet, the stronger her orgasms can be. A woman wants her yin sexual energy to move from being centered in her vagina down to her feet. In the beginning of foreplay, the man should play with the woman's feet, kissing and sucking her toes, in order to draw her sexual energy down to her feet and below her feet to the end of her etheric body. Once her yin energy is warmed up, it can be moved upward to anywhere in the upper yang part of her body. A man is the opposite. Regardless of which sexual foreplay or dissolving technique is used, for a woman to excite a man and maintain his erection, she should concentrate his sexual energy in the upper, yang part of his body (that is, his kidneys, upper torso, arms, and head) before playing with his genitals, buttocks, and legs. For a man's sexual energy to reach its strongest levels of intensity, he wants it to transfer from his genitals and rise to his upper back and the crown of his head and above his head, to the endpoint of his etheric body. In the beginning of foreplay, the woman should first kiss or suck the man's fingers, arms, neck, ears, nose, forehead, or top of his head. Once he is turned on, she can move down to his lower body.

From: http://www.universal- tao.com/article/great_stillness.html

By Dennis Lewis

Our overall health depends on many factors, but one of the most important is how we breathe. Because of the increasing stress in our lives, our unhealthy sedentary life styles, and the prevailing image of the hard, flat belly that we find in fashion magazines and health clubs across America, our breathing has become extremely superficial. Most of us have little understanding of either diaphragmatic breathing or deep, abdominal breathing. Our diaphragm moves very little, and we seldom use our abdomen and belly to help us breathe. Though most of us engaged in abdominal breathing as babies and young children, we have gradually become upper chest breathers. The end result of our poor breathing habits is not only insufficient oxygen to our brain and the other cells of our body, but also insufficient movement in our internal organs and in the fluids upon which our health depends. Without this oxygen and movement we quickly become susceptible to illness and disease.

The Mechanics of Diaphragmatic and Abdominal Breathing

A glimpse into the mechanics of diaphragmatic breathing and abdominal breathing shows why this is so. The first thing to understand is that the diaphragm is a dome-shaped structure that not only assists in breathing, but also acts as a natural partition between our heart and lungs on the one hand, and our stomach, spleen, pancreas, liver, kidneys, bladder, and small and large intestines on the other. The top of the diaphragm actually supports the heart, while the bottom of the diaphragm is attached all the way around our lower ribs and connects also to our lower lumbar vertebrae. When we are breathing fully and deeply, our diaphragm moves downward as we inhale and upward as we exhale. The more the diaphragm can move, the more our lungs are able to expand, which means that more oxygen can be taken in and more carbon dioxide released with each breath.

The Impact of Diaphragmatic and Abdominal Breathing on Our Health

How does diaphragmatic and abdominal breathing help the diaphragm move more and thus improve our health? Remember that the diaphragm is attached all around the lower ribcage and has strands going down to the lumbar vertebrae. When we breathe fully and deeply, the belly, lower ribcage, and lower back all expand on inhalation, thus drawing the diaphragm down deeper into the abdomen, and retract on exhalation. In deep, abdominal breathing, the upward and downward movement of the diaphragm, combined with the outward and inward movement of the belly, ribcage, and lower back, helps to detoxify our inner organs, promote blood flow and peristalsis, and pump the lymph more efficiently through our lymphatic system. The lymphatic system, of course, is an important part of our immune system and has a great impact on our health.

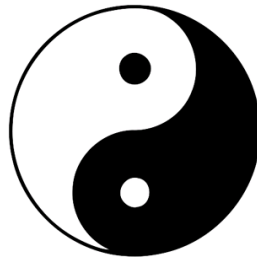
Abdominal and Diaphragmatic Breathing for Relaxation

Many of us breathe too fast for the conditions in which we find ourselves, that is, we actually hyperventilate. This kind of breathing has many bad effects on our physical and emotional health. When our breath is full and deep, however, involving not only the respiratory muscles of the chest but also the belly, lower ribcage, and lower back, we begin to breathe more slowly, since each breath takes in more oxygen and releases more carbon dioxide. This slower breathing, combined with the rhythmical pumping influence of our diaphragm, abdomen, and belly, helps turn on our

parasympathetic nervous system--our "relaxation response." Such breathing helps to harmonize our nervous system and reduce the amount of stress in our lives. And this, of course, has a positive impact on our overall health.

Breathing Exercises Can Be Harmful to Your Health

Everyday we see more and more books being published outlining various advanced yoga breathing exercises. But until we learn how to integrate natural, abdominal breathing into our lives, many of these advanced yoga breathing (pranayama) exercises can be harmful to our physical and psychological health. (Such exercises include alternate nostril breathing, reverse breathing and breath retention.) The key to natural, diaphragmatic and abdominal breathing is to begin to learn to sense unnecessary tension in our bodies and to learn how to release this tension. This requires great inner attention and awareness. It requires learning the art of self-sensing and self-observation. An authentic, beneficial work with our breath begins with increasing our awareness. Without sufficient awareness, without great sensitivity to what is happening inside our bodies, any efforts to change our breathing will at best have no effect whatsoever (we'll quickly stop making any efforts at all), and at worst will create more tension and stress in our lives and thus undermine our health and well-being even further. For an example of how it is possible to begin working in a healthy way with your breathing, you can try this simple transformative breathing practice.



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