

Breathing Techniques

NOTES ON MEDITATION AND HEALTH

Abridged from a text by Cheng Man Ching.

Longevity is a common aspiration of all mankind. The pursuit of long life requires the health of body and mind. If we desire health, in addition to nutrition, medicine, hygiene, and exercise, we must emphasize peace of mind.

In this complex society, we constantly experience confusion and tension, with no means to relax. Beset by worries, tension, restrictions and demands on all sides, the cerebrum is forced to work the entire day. Even in sleep we dream, so there is never a moment's rest. If we can temporarily forget our worries and tensions, thus enabling the body to enjoy relaxation and happiness for a period and allowing the nerves an opportunity for true rest, this not only improves the health of body and mind, but can contribute to longevity and slow down the ageing process. What we mean by temporarily forgetting all cares and tensions is simply seizing a few moments of peace in the midst of this confused and stressful environment. The method for seizing these few moments of peace is meditation.

Meditation is mental concentration. Everything is put aside in order to maintain the peace and tranquillity of the mind and to strengthen the control function of the central nervous system. Moreover, deep breathing during meditation improves blood circulation, increases the absorption of nutrients, and promotes all metabolic processes. The method of breathing used during meditation is abdominal breathing. As we inhale the air, the lungs expand and fill to capacity, allowing it to deeply penetrate the air sacs and to maximize its distribution. At this moment the diaphragm is pushed downward, causing the belly to protrude. When we exhale, the belly contracts, pushing upward, and

completely expelling the stale air in the lungs. In this way, the exchange of gases in the lungs realizes its greatest efficiency. At the same time it constitutes a kind of exercise for the internal organs.

Although deep breathing during exercise also enhances the exchange of gases, it is seldom longer than ten minutes, while the meditator may often spend ten minutes, half an hour or even several hours at a sitting. Also, with experience, one not only uses deep breathing during meditation, but at ordinary times one's breathing becomes deeper, longer, finer and more even. Most people are aware that exercise promotes blood circulation, improves the absorption of nutrients, and aids the process of metabolism. However, following exercise most people feel tired. We often see athletes lying on the grass after exercising with their eyes closed resting. This is an example of taking a moment of peace.

Many people are not fond of exercise. Also many people, because of circumstances in their life or work, do not have time or a suitable place for exercise. This is especially true for middle aged city dwellers who, because of official responsibilities or business concerns, spend every day writing at their desks with no opportunity during the entire year to exercise. If they would meditate every day once or twice at a suitable time, it would be greatly beneficial to their mental and physical health. Meditation certainly does not waste a lot of time. If every evening just before going to sleep or in the morning just after rising, we would simply meditate for 15 - 20 minutes on our beds, it will not interfere with our work schedule. Although these 15 or 20 minutes would seem to reduce our sleep time, in reality, they are even more beneficial than sleep. This is because during sleep our minds are scattered and sometimes we dream. However, meditation concentrates the mind, random thoughts are eliminated, and one enjoys tranquility and peace. This provides true rest for body and mind. Only from

actual experience can one begin to understand this.

Postures and Methods of Meditation:

Lightly close the mouth; The eyelids hang like curtains. Using abdominal breathing, eliminate all random thoughts. The following is a detailed explanation of methods and postures for meditation:

1. Chair sitting. The body should be erect with face forward. The nose and navel and ears and shoulders should be in alignment. The chin is slightly drawn in and the shoulders level. The waist should be straight and our seat stable. The spine should not be stretched too straight, but neither should it be bent. Relax all the muscles of the body without using any strength and be relaxed and natural.

2. Cross-legged sitting. Both legs are bent and the right foot is placed underneath the left thigh. The left foot is placed on the right thigh. This is the half-lotus posture. The full-lotus used by monks is even better. Another posture is the simple-seat, with legs crossed and feet under knees, in general, choose the most comfortable.

3. Hand Position. The two hands, hanging naturally, are placed with the palms up on top of the legs. The palms are placed on top of each other with the tips of the thumbs touching and the "tiger's mouth" facing forward as if holding an object. The hands rest lightly in front of the stomach on top of the calves without pressure and naturally relaxed.

4. Reclining. Lying with the face up (too soft an inner spring mattress is not suitable), the back should be level and straight. The feet are extended level, with the toes pointing upward and naturally relaxed. The palms should face inward, lightly touching the sides of the thighs. The height of the pillow can be adjusted for comfort. All the muscles of the body should be relaxed. The eyes gaze in the direction of the abdomen.

5. First open the mouth and exhale the stale air from the lungs, then close the mouth slowly and draw fresh air in through the nose. Repeat this 3 to 5 times in order to harmonize the breath.

6. Lightly close the mouth. The upper and lower lips and teeth should slightly touch. The tongue sticks to the hard palate behind the top teeth.

7. The eyelids should hang like curtains. The vision extends from the bridge of the nose to the abdomen, but it is not necessary to concentrate. Our attitude should be one of gazing but not gazing, relaxed and natural. The eyes must not be completely shut in order to prevent falling asleep, and the light should not be too bright.

8. Abdominal breathing. Use deep breathing to allow air to completely fill the lungs, but do not expand the chest. The lung cavity expands downward from the pressure of the diaphragm; the downward movement of the diaphragm causes the abdomen to protrude slightly. When, one exhales, the abdomen withdraws as the diaphragm is pressed upwards, forcing the stale' air in the lungs to be completely expelled. The breathing should be deep, long, fine, even, light and slow. There should be no sound. In the beginning, one must not force the breath to be deep and long. If normally one cycle of inhalation and exhalation takes four seconds, then during meditation it should be increased slightly to six seconds. After several weeks, this could be increased to eight seconds. In summary, beginners must not use force to hold the breath in order to avoid a feeling of oppression or discomfort. In slightly extending the length of exhalation, it should not be forced, but perfectly comfortable.

9. Eliminate random thoughts. All random thoughts must be completely banished. In the beginning, the mind is uncontrollable, and it is very difficult to achieve stillness. Simply suspend

cogitation and sink the mind to the abdomen. At the same time, one should use the technique of counting the breaths. This causes the mind to focus on the count, and with practice random thoughts disappear.

10. Counting the breath. One inhalation and one exhalation is called a "breath". One breath equals one count, if you count the exhale, do not count the inhale, and vice versa. Count from one to ten or to one hundred. In the beginning, because random thoughts have not yet been eliminated, one often forgets the count in the middle. Simply start over from one. After a long time proficiency comes, and advanced practitioners can achieve stillness without counting at all.

11. Concentrate the mind. During meditation, the mind should be fixed at one point. In the beginning, one can focus on the Dan-t'ien (a point in the lower abdomen). As one inhales, the mind should concentrate on the lower abdomen and imagine the air penetrating all the way to the abdomen. (In reality, the air only reaches the lungs, but even though it is impossible for it to reach the abdomen, one should imagine this). When exhaling, also imagine that the air is exhaled from the abdomen. At an advanced level one can focus on other points, such as the ni-wan [crown of the head], t'ien t'ing [middle of the forehead], ming-t'ang ["third eye" in the lower forehead], shan-ken [bridge of the nose], chun-t'ou [area under the nose] or yung-ch'an [ball of the foot], etc.

12. When finished meditating, open the mouth and expel three to five breaths to dissipate the heat of the body. Slowly rouse the body, gently stretching out the arms and legs. Rub the hands together to produce heat and massage the face, neck, shoulders, arms and legs while slowly standing up. Beginners, when they feel their legs becoming numb, should massage them until comfortable again. Under no circumstances stand up abruptly.

The preceding points are an elementary presentation of the fundamental methods and postures. More advanced practices will not be described at this time.

In Summary

First harmonize the body: Before meditation, loosen the clothing and undo the belt. Take your seat in an easy and natural way. The body should be erect and the seat stable. The spine should not be stiffly straight nor should it be bent. The shoulders should be level, the waist extended, and all the muscles of the body relaxed.

Second, harmonize the breath: Before meditating, open the mouth and expel a few breaths of stale air from the abdomen. The tongue lightly sticks to the hard palate with the lips and teeth lightly touching. Slowly inhale through the nostrils while imagining that each breath reaches all the way to the abdomen. Then once again exhale from the abdomen, and one will naturally achieve a state of calmness.

Third, harmonize the mind: Most people's thoughts are random and confused. Early on in learning to meditate, people experience an increase in random thoughts as they enter the state of stillness. The more one thinks the further afield one's thoughts run. The mind is like a monkey, and one's thought like horses. It is most difficult to control. One must put everything aside. The mind should focus on the abdomen, and the two eyes, slightly withdrawn, gaze down from the bridge of the nose to the abdomen. At the same time, use the technique of breath counting, and gradually one will be able to avoid confused thinking and eliminate all random thoughts.