

Settling breath exercises

In this article, we will look at the practice of settling and harmonising the chi that we have stimulated and moved during our Tai Chi practice. These exercises should be carried out at the end of ones Tai Chi practice.

The main aim of these exercises is to re-establish harmony of the mind, body and spirit, by centring our mind and returning and settling chi into our Tan Tien.

There are two aspects to this routine and four parts. The two aspects are balancing exercise and meditative exercise. The first three parts are designed to stretch and open the muscles, joints, fluid, and energetic pathways. The fourth part is designed to settle and stabilise the mind, regulate the breath and harmonise the Chi.

Why practice closing exercises?

Many Chi Kung routines practice a method for finishing their practice and they appear under different headings like closing, balancing, or gathering Chi Kung. There are differences, to each of them besides just the physical movements. Some methods may force the chi down in to the Tan Tien these are usually practised with more defined and stronger breathing methods while others simply use the intention to settle the mind with the body.

Tai chi is a natural exercise and movement. If ones use too much force chi can easily becomes stuck in the Tan Tien and involuntary shaking or jumping occurs from the body and the Tan Tien. This is sometimes seen and indeed experienced in Chi Kung usually due to factors arising from the desire to get strong quickly lack of patience frustration. When one forces the practice and thereby holding on to or restricting the chi we go against our inherent nature, this causes undue or damaging internal pressure and sometimes a build up of heat. This can create a negative feed back loop of rising frustration and irritability leading to more pressure etc. teachers need to be aware of personality types who seeking a get rich quick approach to there practice can ultimately get frustrated and in extreme cases damage themselves both physically and mentally.

Seeking enlightenment, a traveller sets out to climb a certain renowned remote mountain. Although the way is long and arduous, he perseveres, for he has heard that, if he climbs long enough, he will reach his goal. Suddenly, moving down hill out

of the mist, a second man appears accompanied by three large black dog; so strongly do they strain on there leashes that the man almost runs to keep. It appears that he walks them, but perhaps they led him.

The two travellers stop and exchange details of their routes and their aspirations.

The second man is not returning from an uphill journey as the first travellers though but indicates that he is following a downward journey to fulfilment.

The first man then realises the dogs that led him darkly onwards are his emotions

Tai chi practice is slow methodical development both physically and mentally. There are times when the going is difficult and the easier path seems attractive, but ultimately the easier ways do not go anywhere.

Benefits

There are many benefits to this exercise the first and simplest benefit is as a physical stretching exercise to balance the left and right sides of the body. It will also loosen up the muscles and tendons open the lungs and allow fresh air in to the body expelling stale and stagnant air. This is what we do naturally when we wake up in the morning and yawn and stretch, (the main thing to note is that it should feel natural).

When we tune into this exercise on a more energetic level, one may experience lightness in the body and a slow calm feeling of expansion and sinking as the breath of the lungs regulates the subtle breath (chi flow) in the arms legs and torso. At this stage, we will naturally start to experience a greater sense of relaxation, balance and calmness.

The functions of these exercises are related to the traditional Chinese medical view of the San Jiao (triple burner). In the yellow emperor classic in book 3 chapter 8, it says that the 'San Jiao is the official who plans the construction of ditches and sluices; they control the water passages'. Its meaning is that it plays a vital part in the free circulation of fluids blood and chi.

In the various stages of energy production, the triple burner regulates the chi. in the upper part (chest and head) it releases and regulates the defensive chi, in the middle part, (abdomen from navel to sternum) it directs nutritive chi to the organs. In the lower part, it releases body fluids to be excreted, (from navel down and includes the

legs and feet). In simple, everyday terms the San Jiao is like a person who oversees and regulates the day to day running of their work team.

The San Jiao is also a channel for the expression and movement of original or source chi, the motivating force behind all physiological functions of the body. One's health depends on the relationship between one's source Chi and the San Jiao. As one gets older the amount of source chi becomes depleted or the normal chi is not strong enough to keep the San Jiao active we start to decline in health. Source chi is the chi you inherit from your parents and does not flow through the conventional channels and pathways hence it needs the San jiao function to communicate with the rest of the energy network of the body.

Chi moves in two basic directions which we can call ascending - equating to a spreading movement of chi up and out, and descending - meaning sinking and inward gathering of chi. In simple terms it is moving or resting, yang or yin respectively. When we practice Tai chi, we are moving chi towards the surface and using our Yi (intent) to maintain an outward direction for our energy flow. If we persist in this and do not spend time with the settling exercises, we can be in danger of causing an imbalance in the body causing stress. Therefore, the chi settling exercises when performed correctly have a beneficial affect over the whole of the energy and information system of the body.

When the chi naturally settles in the Tan Tien, and there is more gathered in the Tan Tien than the extremities one will experience a sense of being small and separate from the outside. There is a view in Chinese medicine to the effect that illnesses are a form of homesickness. The chi does not know where or how to rest. The chi when in a state of agitation moves around and resides in weak areas or becomes stuck. This is why so much time and practice is spent in focusing on the Tan Tien and resting the mind there.

Preparation

There are four parts to this exercise the first three parts are moving and open the muscles joints and fluid pathways, the fourth is static and allows time for the chi to settle back to its own level.

Aim

For the first three exercises, the aim is to allow the breath and the movement to synchronise. The hands reach the chest as the lungs reach capacity. Do not force air in to the lungs it is not necessary to fill every inch of lung tissue, breathe in to a comfortable level and no more. Do not hold the breath.

Exercise one

In this exercise, we are loosening and opening the San Jiao and energetically opening the point on the outer arm that frees up and strengthens the exterior of the body see fig 2

Stand with the feet together, the weight in the middle of the foot. The hands are relaxed at the front with the palms turned to face upwards (see fig. 1)

Raise the heels, breathing in slowly; raise the palms (still facing up) in front of the body until you reach the sternum (see fig 2).

Rotate the palms to face down, then slowly breathing out lower the heels back down to the floor (fig. 3-4). This should have a small upward feel but a stronger downward feeling as though you are pushing into the floor.

Exercise two

In this exercise, we are spreading the Chi. and opening the upper jiao of the body

As before stand with feet together palms facing upward (fig. 5). Breathe in and raise the heels again lifting the hands just like in the previous exercise (fig 6).

This time as the hands reach the sternum the palms turn out and the arms extend forward to the front of the body (fig 7). This activates the point on the inner forearm that opens the yin linking vessel allowing whole body communication

Still on the in breath, extend the arms horizontally out to the side (fig 8).

The palms should now naturally face down. Begin the out breath lower the heels and arms at the same time in a natural arc to the side of the body and therefore arriving back at the starting position (fig 9).

Exercise three

In this exercise, we are expanding the chi.

Once more start the movement in the same way as the previous two exercises, feet flat on the floor and breath in as you raise the arms palm up and lift the heels (fig 10 –11).

Turn and rotate the palms clockwise to face away from the body, (fig.12). Continue on the in breath to extend the arms up over the head as if the palms are pushing up to the sky (fig.13).

Begin the out breath lower the arms slowly in an arc down along the side of the body with the palms facing down. Use the shoulder joint as the pivotal axis of the movement (fig.14). Continue the arc until the palms meet each other at a natural point in front of the body (fig.15). This is the starting point for the three consecutive exercises to begin again.

Repeat all three exercises until the body feels relaxed and balanced keep the rhythm slow and the mind unhurried paying attention to correct body alignment and harmonising the breath with the movement.

Meditative exercise

In this exercise, we are returning the chi to the source.

After the breath settling exercises have been completed, rest the palms on top of each other with the palms facing up as if you are gently supporting your Tan tian (fig 16). Allow your awareness to draw into the Tan tian. Gently half close the eyes

Remain quietly in this position for as long as you feel necessary to achieve some effect. Do not expect to achieve a sense of total relaxation straight away. Centring and quieting of the mind is a long but rewarding process. After a period of regular practice, it will vary from individual to individual, the breathing will be slow, relaxed and unconstrained the mind will be still and the spirit peaceful and refreshed.

The hand shape has the middle joints of the finger resting on each other and the thumb tips lightly touching. Men place the right hand on the left women the left hand on the right figure sixteen shows the female position and figure seventeen the male.

Note: The half-closed eye position in this exercise some times causes confusion and difficulty as to the exact technique. (This position is not like you are squinting it gives the impression of a class full of occidental students looking like oriental ones!) The correct method is to look down and slowly lower the eyelids until there is just enough light filtering in to keep you conscious. If ones eyes are closed, the mind can quickly switch from conscious awareness in to memories or future plans. If the eyes are fully open which is the normal method in many meditation schools there can be too many distractions for the untrained mind and settlement of the mind and body is not achieved with the best results.

Note on breath technique.

The nature of Tai chi and Chi Kung being what it is; based on developing, controlling and refining the subtle breath leads to questions from students on how to breathe. As mentioned earlier when practising the breathing exercises keep the breath natural. What this means is that everyone's breathing pattern will be slightly different from each other, in terms of depth of breath, length or duration of both inhalation and exhalation and quality of breath. The body breathes in a way that it feels it needs too, to maintain its harmony and balance. For instance if we are sprinting a short distance our breathing will be different to that of someone setting off to run a long distance and different from someone under physical psychological or emotional stress. We do not need to learn or switch over to a particular method the body will do it for us naturally. How one breathes can be a strong indication of the way the body is working and flowing with the chi.

There is a lot of information these days on esoteric breathing arts. While maybe interesting to learn and know of from an intellectual standpoint. One will find that over time by simply standing allowing the breath to settle naturally, you will obtain the type

of breath you need for the exercise. Any more than this and you may find that an imposed breathing pattern becomes another part of that person's pattern of holding and resisting.