

*The Magic of Stretching*

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**Learning Objectives:  
Simple techniques to reduce stress  
Increased mind/body awareness**

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Here are some gentle stretches and breathing exercises that can be done at any time of day in any setting. Many of these gentle movements to the core of the body are adapted from the art of qi gong. Other movements are drawn from the eastern arts of tai chi and aikido. All of these gentle movements help balance and promote the balanced flow of energy through your body.

### **Conscious Stretching**

Anyone can stretch various parts of his or her body. We learn to stretch before playing a sport or working out. Some of us have been taught to stretch when we are stressed. How can we heighten the benefit from stretching? The answer is by stretching *with awareness*.

We often do an exercise in our programs at Aiki Works where we ask people to raise their arm at a 90 degree angle from their body, point with a finger, and then turn as far as they can by rotating their hips, feet in place. Having noted how far they turn by marking an invisible spot on the wall to remember, we then have them resume their original position and ‘center.’<sup>1</sup> Usually we coach them to take a few deep breaths from their belly, then raise their arm and imagine a stream of light, color, or sound extending out from their finger. We then ask them to slowly turn again and check if they have turned farther than before. Their range of motion usually increases greatly with the greater awareness that attends their movement.

If we apply this level of consciousness (or centering) in all stretching, the activity becomes more than simply an exercise that reduces stress levels in our bodies and rebalances our systems. The act of stretching becomes an opportunity to anchor and reinforce the sensation of centering in our bodies, making this positive mind/body state more available to us in times of stress. When we are centered in conflict or stress, the increased calmness and heightened awareness natural to this state allow us to be more appropriate in our actions and to actually experience the situation as less stressful.

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<sup>1</sup> References on centering:

- *The Magic of Conflict* by Thomas Crum (Simon and Schuster, 1987)
- *From Chaos to Center* by Judith Warner (Aiki Works, 1999)

## Some Basic Stretches:

Conscious stretching heightens the value of all of the exercises that follow.

### Pushing the Wall



Imagine you are holding a ball of energy in your hands. Inhaling, draw your right arm back, palm up and bending at the elbow, until you feel a good stretch in the right shoulder. At the same time, push your left hand forward, palm facing away until you lock the elbow and feel a good stretch in the back of the left shoulder. Turn your head so that it looks back along the right shoulder. Feel a good stretch at the waist area. Exhaling, come back to center as you return to the starting position with your palms at heart level holding an imaginary energy ball. Inhaling repeat on the other side, left hand back and right hand forward, looking past left shoulder. Exhale as you come back to center. Repeat as many times as you wish.

This exercise, adapted from the Chinese art of qi gong, massages the heart and lungs while balancing those systems. It works wonders for relieving stress and tension held in the upper body. The heart, in Chinese thought, harbors anxiety. Play with the idea of releasing anxiety from your heart and replacing it with love.

## Pulling Taffy



Bring your arms in front of you and bend (90 degrees) at the elbow with your palms facing each other at the height of your throat. Inhaling, make fists with your hands as you draw your arms apart, keeping the elbows bent, until you feel a good stretch across the chest. Exhale, then inhale again. Exhaling, draw your arms back together in front of you. Let the shoulders completely relax and sink down as you do this. Repeat the sequence as many times as you wish.

Like the first exercise, Pushing the Wall, this exercise is good for the heart and lungs and also has its roots in qi gong. Visualizations are an important part of Chinese medicine. The lungs harbor grief and sadness. As you open your arms, visualize opening yourself to life, letting go of attachments, as well as grief and sadness.

## Stretch for Vitality



Start with your hands in front of you as though holding a ball of energy. Turn to the right as you raise your left hand up and to the right, palm up to ceiling and push the right hand down behind your body, palm down. Feel a good stretch in your arms and ribs. Feel that both palms are pushing against something. Exhale, return to center as you relax your arms down to hold an imagined ball of energy, left hand on top, in front of your stomach. Inhale as you turn to the left and raise your right hand up to ceiling to the left, push your left hand down behind the body. Exhale, return to center as you relax arms down and hold a ball, right hand on top, in front of your stomach. Repeat as many times as you wish.

This exercise massages your kidneys by creating a gentle twist in your lower back. The kidney system is the reservoir of your life force. Nurturing your kidneys is fundamental to health. Eastern thought teaches that the kidneys store our fears. As you perform this exercise visualize your fears leaving, being replaced by gentleness.

## Heaven/Earth Connection



Start by holding a ball of energy in front of your body. Then inhale and raise one hand up, palm up to ceiling and push the other hand down towards the floor, palm down. Feel a good stretch in arms and ribs. Exhale and inhale again. Exhaling, relax arms down to hold a ball of energy in front of your stomach. Inhale and switch the arms pushing towards ceiling and floor. Exhale and inhale again. Exhaling, relax arms down to once again hold a ball in front of your stomach.

All the internal organs in your mid section (stomach, spleen, liver and gall bladder) benefit from this exercise. Worry and anger are said to be harbored in this area so focus on letting go of these emotions as you feel a gentle stretch in your rib cage.

## Three Easy Neck Stretches

This set of stretches is a wonderful combo for relieving tension in the neck, particularly after a long day at the computer. Each exercise emphasizes a different stretch.

### Drawing a ‘U’



With your hands on your hips, circle your chin to each side as though you were drawing a “U” with a marker on your chin. You should feel the stretch in the front of your neck

### Ear on the Table



With your hands on your hips, tilt your head forward and look down to the left and then to the right as though you were laying each ear on a table. You should feel the stretch between your shoulder blades

## Ear to the Sky



With your arms relaxed by your sides, stretch your head up straight towards the sky as though you are lifting your ear to the ceiling. You will feel the stretch in the back of your neck.

## Simple Breathing Exercise

Breathing is a fundamental part of life. With absence of breathing, the body's physiological functions shut down and the spirit leaves. In the western world, breathing is often viewed as limited to a physiological function. In the eastern traditions, breathing is seen as a means of cultivating and strengthening energy in the mind/body/spirit system.

Here is a simple breathing practice that you can adapt to your needs. It can be done as a form of active meditation for 10-20 minutes during your day, or it can be used as a simple centering technique when you have a few minutes during your commute or while waiting on someone or something (i.e. on hold on the phone).

### *The Physical Movement:*

Breathe deeply from within your body. Feel your belly moving in and out with each inhalation and exhalation. Fill and empty your lungs totally but without straining. You do not want to increase tension in your body, rather with each breath enter into a deeper, calmer state of being.

### *Visualization:*

Visualization is a powerful part of this breathing practice (called *misogi* or 'purification' in the Japanese). In eastern traditions, it is taught that the mind moves the energy. Here are two visualizations for this practice (feel free to create your own):

1. On the exhalation, let go of worries, anxieties, and all the emotional baggage that holds you back from manifesting your full power. On the inhalation, allow your vision or purpose to permeate every cell of your body.
2. On the exhalation, send out your love and support to your family, friends, and all in the universe. On the inhalation, allow yourself to receive back love and support from the world.

### *Sound:*

Sound is recognized as a powerful medium in eastern traditions. The Chinese teach that sounds resonate within our organs creating healing properties. Western culture has begun to recognize the power of chanting to lower blood pressure and reduce tension and stress in the body. This breathing practice is enhanced by the use of sound on the out breath. Allow your vocal chords to let go of tension and relax by making the sound HAAAAAA as you exhale. (If you are doing this practice on a crowded subway, you may not want to make this a loud noise!)

Enjoy!

## ***Appendices:***

### ***Definition of Stress:***

The state resulting from any adverse stimuli (physical, mental, emotional, internal or external) that cause bodily or mental tension and may be a factor in disease causation.

### ***Sources of Stress:***

1. Physical
2. Psychological
3. Social

### ***Results of Stress:***

Our inability to create time in our lives to recover from stressful events leads researchers to say that stress can increase the possibility of certain diseases or aggravate their intensity if they already exist. Examples include:

- Strokes
- Heart attacks
- Ulcers
- Colitis
- Diabetes
- Irritable bowel syndrome

In addition, the hormones secreted during stress can speed up memory loss as we age, affect our ability to reproduce, decrease our sex drive, compromise our immune system, and impact upon our bone density and muscular condition. Chronic stress can lead to overeating and weight gain.

### **Supplementary Reading:**

*Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers* by Robert Sapolsky (Freeman, 1998)

## **Why Qi Gong?**

Qi Gong has existed for thousands of years as a healing art. Its exercises are practiced daily by people of all ages in many areas of the world.

Qi Gong is the study of

- the overall level of qi (energy) in the body and its organs
- flows of energy within the body
- energy blockages
- how to increase and balance energy within a person

When energy is flowing freely within the body and is at an optimal level, a person is healthy. When qi is low or blockages create imbalances within the various organ systems, a person is more susceptible to illness. Imbalances manifest themselves through specific symptoms depending upon the organ system out of balance. Both emotions and physical events cause imbalances within systems.

To the extent that our inappropriate responses to stress have caused imbalances in our system, qi gong can help to decrease their impact.

**Qi Gong** offers tools for returning the body to balance and nurturing the many organ systems effected by inappropriate responses to stress. These tools include meditation, visualization, breath work and physical movement to maintain wellness in an individual.

- Meditation and breath work help individuals build their store of energy in the body.
- Movement exercises facilitate the balanced flow of energy along the meridians.
- Visualization techniques help move energy within systems.

## **Judith Warner:**

Judith Warner is director of the Rochester, New York office of Aiki Works, a peak performance/stress management company founded by Thomas Crum, author of *The Magic of Conflict* and *Three Deep Breaths* and creator of the Magic of Conflict approach. Judy has presented workshops internationally on conflict resolution, stress management and qi gong. She is the author of *From Chaos to Center: A Training Guide in the Art of Centering* and is co-author with Mr. Crum of *The New Conflict Cookbook: A Parent/Teacher Guide to Helping Young People Deal with Anger and Conflict*. She has produced a DVD, *Centering Movements, Centering Sounds*, on the exercises taught in this seminar. Judy is a certified qi gong therapist and an instructor in the martial art of Aikido — both arts provide a base for many of the mind-body training principles of the Magic of Conflict Approach

## **Resources:**

### Books:

- *Three Deep Breaths: Finding Power and Purpose in a Stressed-Out World* by Thomas Crum (Berrett-Koehler, 2006)
- *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers* by Robert Sapolsky (Freeman, 1999)
- *The Healing Art of Qi Gong* by Master Hong Liu with Paul Perry (Warner, 1997)
- *The Magic of Conflict* by Thomas Crum (Simon and Schuster, 1987)
- *From Chaos to Center* by Judith Warner (Aiki Works, 1999)
- *The Relaxation Response* by Herbert Benson (Whole Care, 1975)

### DVD:

*Centering Moments, Centering Sounds: Ten Minutes to Inner Peace, Health and Energy* by Judy Warner (Aiki Works, 2002)

*The Aiki Energizer* by Thomas Crum (Aiki Works, 1991)

### Email:

Reinforce your ability to center with Centering Hints — monthly tips, reflections, and short inspiring stories delivered by email by Aiki Works. To subscribe, write [centeringhints@aikiworks.com](mailto:centeringhints@aikiworks.com).

### Website:

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**When tension is building in your body, try some stretches you learned today. Clip out this card and keep it near at work:**

### **The Magic of Stretching!**

#### **Full Stretches:**

- **Push Against a Wall**  
one hand to the front, other back toward armpit
- **Pull Out Some Taffy**  
At eye level, hands move on horizontal line out to walls and back towards face
- **Stretch for Vitality**  
One hand towards sky and other behind hip, slight twist in lower back, repeat for other side.
- **Touch Heaven and Earth**  
One hand to sky, other towards earth and then switch sides.

#### **Neck Stretches:**

- **Draw a “U”**  
Hands on hips, move chin in “u” movement
- **Ear on a Table**  
Hands on hips, shoulders rounded, “lay” ear on imaginary table. Switch sides.
- **Ear to the Sky**  
Hands at side, ear “reaches” towards sky. Switch sides.

**And, whenever you have time (or feel that you don’t!), take a few deep breaths from your belly.**

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