

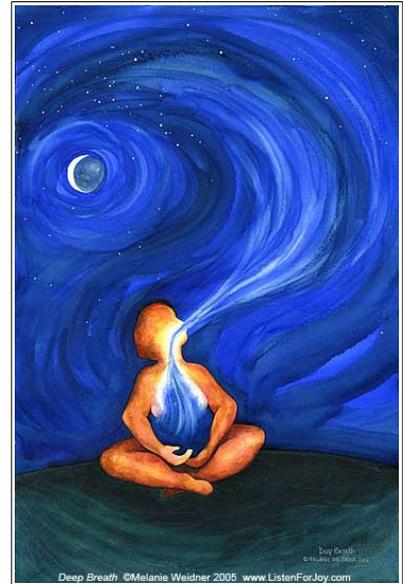
CHAPTER FOUR: CONSCIOUS BREATHING

“Smile, breathe, and go slowly...” – Thich Nhat Hanh

Take a Breath

One of the principles found in nearly all qigong systems is the use of conscious breathing. As mentioned earlier, the word “qi” is itself often translated as “breath” indicating just how vital this quality is to effective practice. Through proper breath work we can achieve progressively deeper states of calm, centered awareness. We can relax the body more easily and allow a stronger, smoother flow of energy to circulate through out our system. Our breath has this ability to both enhance energy flow and to concentrate it as well. It can also be used to “inspire” and guide movement in qigong choreography giving our practice a deeper, far more satisfying feeling as we’ll see a bit later.

Breath can also help augment postures in Tai Chi practice giving them a more substantial feel and helping connect the different parts of the body into a more integrated experience. Of course the breath also performs the vital function of cellular oxygenation and the release of carbon dioxide. All these things enhance our health and wellbeing, maintain healthy tissues, stimulate clear thinking, and assist us in cultivating the rest of the principles we’ll discuss in this course.



“Breathe” by Melanie Weidner

Our breath further acts as a bridge between our energy and our consciousness, between our body and our mind. Teachers of various disciplines have long advised that if you find yourself in a stressful situation for any reason, to take a moment and breathe deeply. This serves the purpose of calming the body and giving our mind time to center and respond with presence rather than through reactive fight, flight, or freeze. The conscious use of breath is a tool through which we can elevate our mood, expand our perception, and raise our energy level. In so doing, we can profoundly change the quality of our present moment. At times, this can seem almost magically effective. And this skill becomes more powerful with practice.

Abdominal Breathing

Many people have “learned”, through the experience of stress and trauma, a pattern of breathing that is shallow and tends to reside in the upper portion of the chest. This diminishes our overall breathing capacity and efficiency. It also creates unnecessary tension in our musculature, especially the chest, shoulders, and neck. It also creates a tendency for the “qi to rise” inappropriately. If you observe people when they are upset, this pattern of shallow chest breathing quickens and becomes even more obvious.

By way of contrast, if you notice people who are calm, centered, and focused in a relaxed way, nearly always their breath is smooth, full and settled lower in the abdomen.

While there are many ways of approaching breath work, for our purposes, the study of *abdominal*

breathing is the most useful place to begin. Physiologically, this type of breathing is the most natural and efficient for us while also being a foundation upon which we can build more advanced techniques. The ability to focus our breath in the abdomen leads to the ability to achieve a complete breath and then to focus breath in specific areas of the body as well. This skill can greatly aid in the healing and strengthening of the body. It is also useful in integrating and augmenting the movements of Tai Chi Chuan.

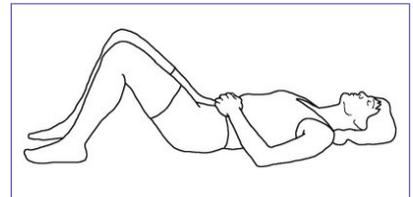
Abdominal breathing is sometimes referred to as Buddhist breathing in that it is a common technique used in many types of Buddhist meditation. In the Taoist tradition, abdominal breathing is sometimes referred to as "return to infancy breathing". This is because infants naturally tend to breathe in their bellies. This can be observed by watching the gentle rise and fall of their navel region. Again, this is both relaxing, natural, and efficient.

*Everything in heaven and earth breathes. Breath is the thread that ties all creation together.”
- Morihei Ueshiba*

Abdominal breathing is commonly used in such disciplines as yoga, various martial arts, meditation, singing, certain musical instruments, and some kinds of sports training. In the west, this technique is referred to as *diaphragmatic breathing* distinguishing it from chest (or thoracic) breathing. Using the diaphragm to breathe deeply requires less energy and uses fewer muscles than breathing into the chest. This requires a measure of cultivated awareness which assists us in the coordination of mind and body, a quality essential to achieving good results in qigong practice. Finally, abdominal breathing is essential in developing the principle of “Resonant Sound” which we'll discuss later. When it comes to qigong training, abdominal breathing is a foundational skill and well worth developing thoroughly.

Learning Abdominal Breathing

An easy way to learn this type of breathing is as follows: Lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet on the floor. Rest your hands on your abdomen in the area of the navel. This region is referred to as the lower "dantien". Next, breathe into your abdomen so that it expands as you inhale; your hands will rise a bit as a result. As you exhale, your abdomen will relax back down to its original position. Once you achieve this, you are doing abdominal breathing! It's as simple as that.



Now let's refine this a little further

Place your attention on your chest and shoulders. As you breathe again into your abdomen, let your chest and shoulders remain relaxed and unmoving. We want the abdominal region to be the **only** area of your torso to rise and fall. You may have to work at this a little or it may come quite easily for you.

It may be helpful to have a friend place their hands on your shoulders and upper chest to remind you to release any tension in these areas and keep them uninvolved in your inhalation. It may also be useful to have them place a hand on your belly as you breathe into that region. In this case, your friend's hand acts as reference point and can make it easier to focus. With a little practice, you'll get the idea.

A little further still...

Now extend your awareness from the abdominal region to include your lower back area as well. As you breathe, feel BOTH your belly and your lower back expand as you inhale and then release as you exhale. You will be able to feel your lower back gently press into the floor as you do this. The floor of

the pelvis will likewise expand a little with the inhalation. It does this quite naturally if you are relaxed. Awareness at this level can later be used in more advanced practices to energize the kidneys and dantien.

With this level of abdominal breathing we are actually breathing into the entire lower region which begins just beneath the diaphragm and extends down to include the entire pelvic basin. It is like a large sphere that expands and contracts as we breathe.

As before, the shoulders and chest remain relaxed and still. Play with this for a while until you feel comfortable with your ability to coordinate your breath in this area. Then, find a stool or straight-backed chair and continue your practice in a seated position. If you have any difficulty with this while seated, return to the lying down position and use it to teach yourself the quality we now want to develop while sitting. Eventually, this will come quite naturally and it will feel both relaxing and centering.

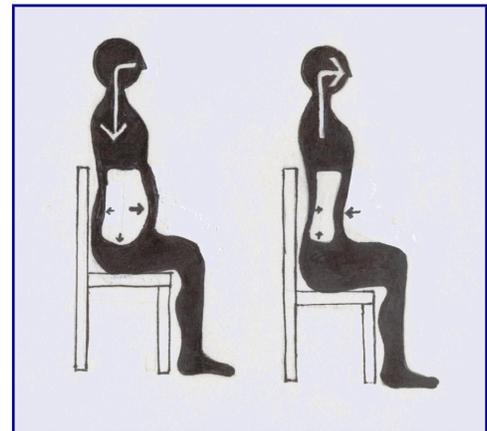
Adding Abdominal Breathing to Zhan Zhuang

We are now ready to further enhance our preliminary approach to Zhan Zhuang qigong.

► Sit on your stool or straight back chair and comfortably align your posture as discussed above. Place your hands in your lap and begin to breathe into your abdominal region – in and out at a comfortable pace. *Emphasize the ease and depth of your breath.* If at first you experience a few distracting thoughts, understand that this is quite common. A useful approach is simply to notice them as you would notice a quiet ripple on a lake or a cloud drifting across the sky, and then return to your breathing. The more you practice, the quieter your mind will become. This quality alone is well worth your time and attention.

► The general rule of thumb is that you inhale through the nose and exhale through the mouth. This pattern filters the air (as it goes in through your nose) and allows you optimal control of the breath in both directions. (Exhaling through the nose is also fine, but many find that exhaling through the mouth affords more control.) Work to cultivate smooth, even breathing with as little break as possible as inhale changes to exhale and back again. It is very much like the ebb and flow of a gentle ocean swell. Cultivate this circular quality in your breathing.

► It can be helpful, especially at first, to use a count with your practice. You might count from 1 to 5 as you inhale and then 1 to 7 or 8 as you exhale. The exhalation naturally tends to be a little longer. The number to which you count will depend on both your breathing capacity and the speed at which you count. Try to be consistent with pace, but don't force it and note that your count does not always need to be the same. Let it be just what it is. Over time your breathing capacity and quality will noticeably improve. The purpose of counting is simply to help focus the mind and develop smoothness and consistency in the quality of your breathing.

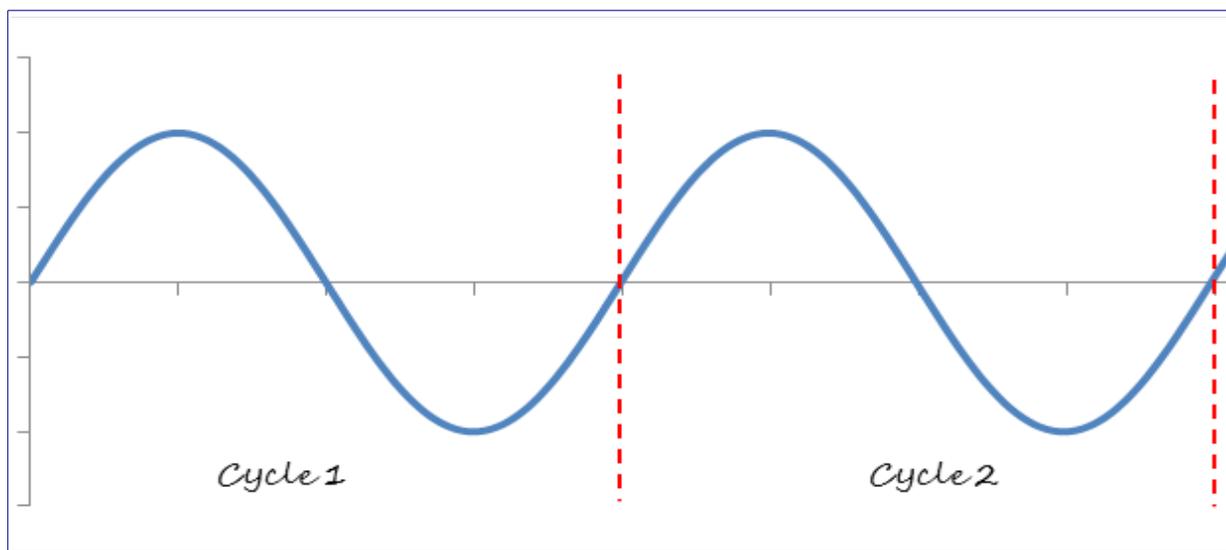


As we breathe in (left), the abdomen expands, the low back expands, and even the floor of the pelvis opens a little. On the exhale (right), everything releases in a relaxed but controlled manner. The abdomen draws in slightly.

► A 5-10 minute session is sufficient for now. Note that at the most basic level, your practice this week is simply to sit comfortably and breathe consciously. This alone is time well spent. Beyond that, you are cultivating the ability to focus and enjoy abdominal breathing in a smooth, deep, and continuous manner.

The Wave-like Nature of Breathing

Let's now consider the natural, wave-like quality of our breathing. In simplest terms, we want our breath to move deeply and slowly, and to transition from inhale to exhale and back again with as little break as possible. We want smooth, easy changes from inhale to exhale. To visualize and further explore this we can use the image of a sine wave below:¹



The line moving upward represents the inhalation with the peak being its completion. The line moving downward represents the exhalation with the trough being its completion. For purposes of more thoroughly understanding our breath, we can divide our breathing cycle into five parts:

1. The Passive Inhalation
2. The Active Inhalation
3. The Turn-around Point (where inhale becomes exhale and vice-versa)
4. The Passive Exhalation
5. The Active Exhalation

If we begin our study of the phases of breath with a full exhalation (to start from a clear position), what happens next is a Passive Inhalation. This means if we do nothing at all, inhalation will occur on its own.² But if we are attending to our breath, for purposes of qigong, mediation, etc., we can choose to take our inhalation further and deeper with Active Inhalation until we reach the limit of our breathing capacity without strain. At this top of our inhalation, we

The ability to focus your breath in the abdomen steadily matures into the ability to focus it in other areas of the body as well, supporting and guiding the flow of chi into these areas.

¹ Special thanks to Sam Masich (www.sammasich.com) for this chart and his excellent discussions on breath work.

² The body, of course, passively inhales and exhales automatically whether we are awake or asleep. This is happily hardwired into our nervous system, though passive breathing is normally much more shallow than conscious breathing.

reach the turn-around point where our inhalation yields to exhalation, specifically the Passive Exhalation phase. Again, if we are attending to our breath, we can choose to exhale further (Active Exhalation) until we reach its limit without straining. Next we encounter the turn-around point and exhale is once more transformed to the Passive Inhalation phase and the cycle continues.

Within both active and passive phases, we have the ability to influence both the pace and quality of inhalation and exhalation. Typically we will want both to become deeper, slower, smoother, and more relaxed.

► *Becoming More Familiar with Your Breath:* Before we continue, let me suggest that you take some time to sit comfortably and simply watch the different phases of your breathing. Notice how, with minimal influence on your part, the inhale happens by itself, you can then add a little to it making it more active until the moment where the passive exhale begins, you can add a little to that as well, and then the cycle will begin again with the passive inhale. Just allow yourself to enjoy exploring and watching your breath without altering it all that much. There is considerable value in simply becoming more aware of these phases of your breath in this simple fashion; it helps us get in touch with our humanness in a very direct way.

► *Deeper, Smoother, More Relaxed:* Once you have identified these 5 phases and have some familiarity with them, we can more easily enhance the quality and depth of our breath. One of the main benefits of breath cultivation is that it powerfully enhances our ability to relax and release stress and tension. In the next chapter we'll discuss this in more detail. For now, as part of your breath training, I suggest that you simply begin to *deepen* and *slow* the pace of both your inhale and exhale in such a way that feels genuinely good to you. This can be accomplished more easily by more thoroughly relaxing your body both externally and internally. In turn, your slower, deeper breathing will help you relax more completely, creating a positive feed back loop. Beyond this, we can begin to pay more attention to the turn around points where inhale becomes exhale and vice versa.

► *The Turn-Around Point:* Notice on our sine wave that one part of the breath *smoothly* transitions into the next through the *turn-around point*. To achieve this this smooth transition takes a little practice. Often when people breathe, there is an abrupt break between exhale and inhale. This is even more pronounced during exertion as in gasping. For our purposes in qigong training, we want to soften this transition as much as possible and even extend and explore this unique transitional space. You may have noticed that as both inhale and exhale approach their completion, the breath becomes “thinner” in that air is still moving but not as much, and then not at all as it pauses and changes direction. To better develop a smooth, wave-like quality, we can watch this thinning process of

About Music and Practice

Some people find it enjoyable and helpful to practice qigong and especially breath work with music playing softly in the background. It can help relax the conscious mind while enhancing and even inspiring focus in various ways. You might find music to be particularly helpful with extended breath work and in cultivating deep relaxation. In general, its preferable to choose instrumental, harmonious music that does not change tempo very dramatically and can easily fade into the background. Others prefer to simply enjoy the silence or the sounds of nature as they practice. I sometimes use music but more often not. As always, use what works best for you and experiment with different approaches.



Breathe like a vast and gentle ocean wave...

the breath and gently extend it. At a certain point, it may feel as if the breath is “suspended” at the top of the apex or the bottom of the trough just before it continues on to its next phase. Then, the next phase of breath comes quietly on line, building as it continues, and then thinning again as it completes and reaches the next turn-around point. Note that this quality of suspension is different from merely “holding” your breath. It is a quieter quality. It is very conscious and working with it requires listening to your body while releasing any sense of strain.

To develop this quality of breath, you may find it helpful to visualize the above sine wave as you go through the various phases or you may find it helpful to visualize the easy movement of a gentle ocean wave as it washes up into the beach, extends as far as it is comfortably able, pauses, and then gently, naturally draws back in again to rejoin with the vastness of the ocean before once more extending back out onto the beach. It can also be helpful to add a count to your breathing. For instance, you could count to 5 on the in-breath and 5 on the out-breath and simply notice and soften the spaces in between. Use your counting naturally, nothing forced or contrived and it need not even be consistent. One time, you might count in to 4 and out to 6 for instance. You could also add a count of 2 or 3 or more on the turn-around points if you find that helpful. The usefulness of counting is in its ability to hone your awareness and focus. Just try to be consistent with the pace.

Suspending or lengthening the time you can *comfortably* spend in the turn-around points can enhance a state of mind that is very quiet, centered, and present. It can help us to detach from distracting thoughts and to calm our nervous system and it will connect your breath into a more singular, organic, harmonious experience which will further enhance the rest of your qigong practice. For Taiji practitioners, this attention to breathing helps us to release any strain or unnecessary tension from our movement. It will also help us to coordinate and augment our movement with our breathing.

► *Abdominal vs. Full-Breathing:* You can work with your breath in this way using either abdominal breathing or by using your full breathing capacity. To use your full capacity, you simply begin by inhaling first into the abdomen, then gently continuing by expanding the rib cage in your mid section (primarily to the sides), and then further up to include the chest and back while keeping the shoulders down and relaxed. It is just like filling up a glass of water which fills from the bottom to the top. The exhale simply releases slowly and fully with less attention to sections. This is also referred to as *Three-Phase Breathing* due to the three basic regions involved. The main muscle groups involved include the abdominal muscles, the intercostals of the rib cage, and the respiratory diaphragm. Using the full breath in this way will give you more air to work with as you develop this wave-like quality. The advantage to focusing on abdominal breathing is that it has a tendency to be more calming and centering so I would recommend beginning here and then developing smoother Three-Phase Breathing as you become more experienced with your breath work and as you progress into some of the moving *qigong* practices later in this book.

► *Deep Breathing and the Alpha State:* Another distinct advantage to deep, relaxed breathing has to do with something called the Alpha brain state. Our brain has billions of cells called neurons which use varying levels of electrical current to communicate with each other. These currents express in wave-like patterns called brain waves which can be detected by medical equipment such as the electroencephalograph (EEG). Four primary wave patterns have been identified and associated with states of human consciousness: Beta, Alpha, Theta, and Delta³.

Another hint for more quickly entering the Alpha state is to gently “look” with eyes closed to an area about 20 degrees above the horizon. Relax and softly focus in this fashion and notice how your awareness changes.

3 There is also a less often discussed Gamma state which is associated with a quality of peak concentration and access to more subtle aspects of human capacity. It's beyond the scope of this book, but you may wish to research it...

Here's a brief description of each:

(1) *Beta* – This is a rapid pattern ranging from 15-40 cycles per second⁴ and tends to be the most common conscious state. It is generally alert and is present during analytical thinking. It is also the range in which one may feel agitated, stressed, or fearful. The higher the stress, the faster the brain wave activity (within this range).

(2) *Alpha* – This pattern ranges from 9-14 cycles per second and occurs when we are in a state of physical, mental, and emotional relaxation. We are aware of what is happening around us and have greater access to our inner resources and insights. It is present while daydreaming, listening to calm music, or while doing other activities which are relaxing and pleasing in nature.

(3) *Theta* – This pattern ranges from 5-8 pulses per second. The Theta state is typically a very positive state which occurs during deep meditation, deep hypnosis, and centered creative activity. It can be present during a “runner's high” or other activities during which analytical thinking does not interfere with the activity. With practice the Theta state can be achieved and maintained with a high level of presence and reliability.

(4) *Delta* – This pattern ranges from 1.5-4 cycles per second. It typically occurs with very deep, unconscious sleep, though there are some advanced yogis who reportedly can also maintain awareness even at this very low brain wave state.

Understanding that different brain states exist and that we can experience them *on purpose* depending on what our goal may be, can offer us greater access to inner resources and can allow us to experience the world around us with greater flexibility and creativity.

For our current purposes, the Alpha state is most important as it is one we can reach and benefit from quite easily. And, with practice, it can help us to achieve the deeper Theta state. Simply relaxing and breathing comfortably will cause our brain activity to slow down and produce more Alpha waves. With a little attention, it is easy to notice this shift in consciousness. It is a most enjoyable and expansive feeling. There are many advantages to this state which include the following: increased capacity to learn new information, enhanced ability to receive insight, to analyze complex situations, visualize, problem solve, and have greater access to other inner resources. Neuroscientists studying the Alpha state have discovered significant increases in levels of beta-endorphin, norepinephrin, and dopamine which relate to feelings of expanded mental clarity, well-being, and creative thinking.

In short, the Alpha state (in concert with Theta) is excellent for learning, problem-solving, creative expression, and healing. As such it is well worth our awareness and consideration during our qigong practices. Again, we begin to transition from Beta to Alpha with simple abdominal breathing. You may notice yourself moving into alpha as a feeling of calm well-being and an enhanced “sense of self”.

Breath Work for Restoring Health and Wellbeing

Conscious breathing techniques can powerfully contribute to nearly any healing process. Proper breathing efficiently oxygenates the cells of the body while expelling carbon dioxide; it calms and beneficially influences the Autonomic Nervous System responsible for the fight or flight response, blood pressure, heart rate, digestion, and much more; and proper breathing helps the mind to become more calm and centered and better capable of clear thinking. Breath-work for healing purposes begins with the basic instructions for abdominal breathing given above and later incorporates Three-Phase

⁴ Note that the numbers used here for the various brain states come from Scientific American. There are noticeable differences among various other sources. What is important to us, however, is the basic concept of different brain states and one's personal experience of moving from a more intellectualized (or stressful) Beta state to a more relaxed and spacious Alpha state and then to a deeper meditative Theta state.

Breathing and other more specific techniques.

Several Taiji students of mine, when confronted with injuries that required them to sit out from class for a period of time, maintained their practice by doing focused breathing exercises, deepening the more internal part of their practice, while also visualizing themselves practicing their Taiji form flawlessly. This proved to be very satisfying while quite likely hastening their healing process and their return to class.

Some other common examples in which breath-work is beneficial for supporting healing include adrenal fatigue, chronic and acute pain, cancer, high blood pressure, anxiety, and more. For more detailed information on how breath-work may support a larger approach to these and other conditions, seek out an experienced qigong healing professional to work with you.

Breath Awareness through the Day

Begin to notice your breathing as you go about your daily life. Tap into it consciously as often as possible and use that deep relaxed flow to center your mind and emotions. In particular, notice if your breath becomes shallow in response to certain surroundings, circumstances, people, or even the content of your thoughts. Then gently deepen it again and watch as you regain your sense of center, focus, and wakefulness.

The breath is an entire arena of mastery unto itself containing many techniques each with their own unique qualities and subtleties. One could easily spend years just mastering the breath and realize great benefits. Simple abdominal breathing is our point of entry and we'll build upon this foundation as we continue. See *Appendix Two* for an additional breathing technique that can be very helpful in balancing your energies, calming the nervous system, and enhancing the flow of qi through out your meridians.

From a broader perspective, this circular, ebb-and-flow-like quality of the breath is one we can observe in nature, in the changing of seasons, in relationships, in projects, and in many other aspects of our lives. Where there is breath, there is change, where there is change, we can choose to move gracefully, consciously, and with improving integrity. We can tune into where we are in any cycle in any given moment. Is the energy building, is it pausing, is it declining, preparing to change in some way? Are we in a position to add creative or supportive energy or is it better to observe, go with the flow, gather more awareness, before we act, in harmony with the subtle, pervasive Tao of the moment. There is a natural rhythm in all things that is worth becoming deeply respectful of and intimate with. I believe it can allow us to move with far more grace and harmony in life.

The Natural Breath

Finally, it is important to note that while it is highly beneficial to cultivate the qualities of breathing as discussed above, we don't want to fixate on the breath either. As we become more skilled at deeper, smoother, more relaxed breathing, we can set aside our focus on it and allow it to coordinate itself during our practice. I generally recommend that students begin their practice with attention to the breath, especially in the earlier stages of training, and then as they settle into a steady rhythm, let the breath become natural and move the attention into further areas of practice as discussed in later chapters.

The attention we give to breath cultivation will train our subconscious mind to attend to these qualities more and more even when we are not focusing on them. The breath will attain a deeper wisdom and

facility to support the rest of our *qigong* practice as we continue.

Four Approaches to Practice



Finally in this section, let's look at the kinds of practice available to us as we seek to gain the most benefit from our qigong. True learning always involves the practical application of what is learned. To make qigong as helpful as possible, we can look at four methods of practice that move us from theory to tangible experience to ever greater mastery.

1. Formal Practice: This is our primary fuel source. It is what propels us forward and refers, of course, to the training routine we established earlier. During this time we cultivate our core principles through the particular technique(s) we have chosen. Each session offers us the opportunity to dive deeper into our personal understanding of qigong and the development of our energy and awareness. A good goal is to eventually reach 20-60 minutes each day in formal practice though you can begin with as little as 5 minutes and still benefit. The key is your *consistency* which builds positive momentum and greater mastery with each session. Developing the inner strength of consistent personal practice is powerful and worthwhile attainment in its own right and can't be over emphasized.

2. Interval Practice: With interval practice, we are taking anywhere from 5-15 minutes to work with an exercise in between other daily activities. I often do interval practice when I have some time between clients or between other scheduled activities. This is a way of strengthening our center, calming our mind, and giving extra focus to qualities we are developing. Do this several times throughout your day, whenever it occurs to you. After a few weeks of interspersed interval training, you'll be surprised how much "extra" practice time you've accumulated and how much better you'll feel. This is a secret to making faster progress than you would otherwise achieve.

3. Lifestyle Practice: This is where you begin to consciously integrate qigong principles into your daily life. For example, as you are driving begin to notice your breathing and bring it more deeply into your abdomen. When speaking on the phone, notice and refine your posture. If you find yourself in a conflict with someone, remember to keep your center and seek your natural sense of ease. Ways of applying what you learn during these lessons will become very obvious to you as you make it a priority to integrate them into your lifestyle. It is always interesting and inspiring to hear the experiences practitioners have with this work. Drop me a line if you wish. I would love to hear your successes and how you are weaving your practice into your life.

4. Extended Practice: This is a special approach to practice in which we create a longer period of time dedicated to self-cultivation. I have benefited a lot from this sort of practice, working with various teachers over the course of long weekends or even weeks at a time. Immersing oneself in practice like this affords a unique opportunity to both contemplate and apply the ideas we're discussing in a practical, deep, and supportive manner. If you are so inclined, seek out a qualified teacher who offers workshops or intensives and dive in. You can also create your own personal retreat in which to combine qigong with meditation, journaling, or any other method of self-cultivation you may choose. I believe you'll find it well worth your good efforts.

Quick Review

1. Proper and specific use of the breath is a fundamental component of nearly all qigong practices.
2. Abdominal breathing is an efficient, natural, and enlivening way of breathing. It is also calming and relaxing, and can heighten our internal and external awareness.
3. In addition to focused qigong practice, we can use abdominal breathing to help release stress and improve our sense of well being.
4. It is beneficial to develop abdominal breathing as our normal way of daily breathing. The breath does not have to be as deep or long as when in formal practice, so long as it is comfortably centered in the abdominal region.
5. Abdominal breathing is quite simple to do, though it might take a little practice at first, and years to completely integrate and refine.
6. There are four basic ways in which we can approach our practice of qigong: Formal, Interval, and Lifestyle, and Extended. Each has its place and will add greatly to your progress.

Action Plan for Chapter Four

1. Reread through this weeks lesson, taking any notes or noting any questions.
2. Go through the abdominal breathing instructions and become comfortable with the basic technique.
3. Daily Practice: First, align your sitting posture as previously discussed. Take this time to explore your breathing more deeply than before in an easy, non-stressful manner. There are many secrets to be found within our breath. Our primary focus for this weeks practice is simply to become more comfortable and adept at smooth, full, relaxed abdominal breathing. Once you move to standing, continue to explore and develop this quality of breath.
4. Start to become aware of your breath as you go through your daily life. Enjoy deeper, more relaxed breathing and the benefits that accompany it. Perhaps begin to notice breathing patterns in those around you.