

CHAPTER FIVE: DYNAMIC RELAXATION

“Stress is who the ego thinks you should be. Relaxation is who you are.”
– anon

The Principle of Relaxation

A piece of advice Tai Chi students often hear goes something like: "That's good, but you need to relax more." The teacher will usually offer a suggestion for how to proceed and, if successful, the student will often sigh with relief, or even laugh, as they realize a greater degree of comfort and function. The difference can be a surprising and delightful at times.

Certainly, relaxation is one of the most important qualities present in the movements of Tai Chi and qigong. Even for advanced practitioners, achieving a deeper level of relaxation is often a key to better results and higher levels of mastery.



“Open Spaces” by Melanie Weidner

By consistently cultivating deep relaxation we can improve our health and influence our energy flow in beneficial ways. It has been my consistent experience that all we do in practice and in life becomes easier, more interesting, and more effective as we are able to *release any sense of strain and relax* more completely. I would further say that among the different ways we can focus our practice, dynamic relaxation and feelings of genuine well-being are among the most helpful. For this reason, it is a major point of emphasis in this course on qigong fundamentals. We'll look at this quality in depth so that we may teach ourselves to relax more thoroughly and attain greater ease within ourselves and with the world around us.

A high level of relaxation is achieved when our body is at ease and our mind is peaceful and whole-hearted in its focus.

So what exactly *is* relaxation, how does it serve us, and how can we better achieve it? While the question may seem obvious at first glance, it becomes more involved when we realize that relaxation is not merely physical. It is actually an inclusive quality of body, mind, emotion, and lifestyle. It is well worth a deep examination as much of our development rests upon our ability to consistently cultivate dynamic relaxation.

I use the word *dynamic* here to distinguish our meaning from the more common notion of *passive* relaxation – falling asleep on a hammock, a lazy walk through the park, etc. While passive relaxation is pleasant and important, it is different from what we'll be developing here.

Dynamic Relaxation

The ideal state of dynamic relaxation *is a quality of being both highly effective and thoroughly at ease*. This involves using the least amount (or just the right amount) of effort to achieve a desired outcome. It

involves intelligent movement and a peaceful, whole-hearted expression.

Consider this manifestation within nature – the blossoming of a flower, a change of seasons, the endless rolling ocean... Nature constantly demonstrates grace and effortlessness in its expression. There is neither strife nor struggle. There is only a relaxed and certain progression that manifests with clarity and integrity. Even the awesome and “violent” energy of hurricanes, volcanoes, and tsunamis, is balanced within itself. It rises, expresses, and then dissipates when complete, all without a hint of stress or anxiety. Nature is effective, clear, and dynamically relaxed in its expression, even to the point of awe-inspiring beauty.

So what if we were to take *seriously* the idea that each of us is likewise a force or an expression of nature? And what if we were to bring this feeling into our practice of qigong in increasingly intelligent and vibrant ways? What if we were to then extend this energy, more and more, into all that we do? This, I would offer, is a truly good focus to develop. Teachers of various spiritual disciplines have often suggested that when we strip away the stress and angst of ego and culture, ALL that remains is the peace, ease, power, and harmonious creativity of our natural, true self. I believe such notions are well worth our curiosity and ardent contemplation.

The Benefits of Deep Relaxation:

- * Deep relaxation releases stress and the effects of stress from our bodies. It enables our body to function with greater efficiency and with less wear and tear on our organs.
- * Relaxation helps lower blood pressure, relieves fatigue, promotes deeper, more restful sleep, and can reduce or eliminate certain pain patterns.
- * Relaxation is important for improving the circulation of both blood and *chi*. Chronic muscle tightness inhibits both.
- * Relaxation greatly enhances control of your physical body. The more tension you carry, the more difficult it is to move effectively and with precision. Just watch any well trained athlete and you will see a picture of organized relaxation.
- * Relaxation increases our ability to concentrate and think clearly. It helps us to release worrisome thought patterns. This results in our becoming more productive at whatever we are doing.
- * Relaxation helps us to enter expanded states of mind to improve learning, heighten perception, and receive information from other levels of awareness.
- * Deeper relaxation also facilitates higher levels of emotional and cognitive flexibility through which we can more easily adapt to our rapidly changing world.

Dynamic relaxation begins with the body and the release of excess tension. This is an obvious but important point. Have you ever noticed your muscles to contain more tension than necessary for what you were doing? While driving, have you ever noticed your shoulders drawn up toward your ears? While standing in line have you ever felt tightness in your knees, chest, or back? We could look at many examples in which our bodies harbor tension reflecting to us that we are not at ease, that we are not feeling and living as effortlessly as we might. The first step to letting go of this tension is to realize that we can. The next step often involves adjusting our posture and then using the tools in this and later sections. You may have noticed from our earlier exploration of posture, that simply refining the alignment of our spine can elevate our state of awareness and energy flow. This, in itself, can begin to dissipate certain mental/emotional/energetic tensions. This can be subtle, but you'll notice it with practice.

Dynamic relaxation also involves releasing unsupportive thought patterns and fear-based emotions. In our current society, it can be uncommon to meet people who consistently maintain a calm, life-affirming attitude in heart, mind, and deed – though this is well within our potential. A recent report by Medco Health Solutions states that 1 in 5 Americans take some form of psychiatric medication.¹ Think

¹ Medco Health Solutions monitors drug trends in insurance claims. <http://healthland.time.com/2011/11/16/report-whos-taking-mental-health-drugs-in-america/>

about that for a moment... Another study by the Mayo Clinic shows that 70 percent of all Americans take some form of prescription medication with antidepressants being the second most common.² There is a lot we might read into this beginning with the obvious: many among us are highly stressed and far too medicated, especially considering the damaging effects of many psychiatric meds.³ These statistics are an important reflection on our society and are one good reason for us all to have some form of empowering practice to help us to clear and connect with an inner sense of peace, well-being, and creativity.

A primary source of the stress we experience relates to past traumas and unsupportive (or conflicting) beliefs. The good news here is that we *can* heal. Through our own good efforts and the support of others of good-will, we *can* rediscover health and wholeness in deep and lasting ways.

Relaxation is your birthright. We all have the ability to be optimally effective and at ease in our lives. We simply must claim this as a priority for ourselves.

A less obvious contributor to stress is cultural. Much of the influence from our media and political leadership *actively* promotes an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty. This is done through rhetoric and policy and has been increasingly true since the events of September 11th, 2001. I suspect you've noticed this. The concepts of "terror" and "security" have become the new justifications for political change, the suppression of human rights, and the further movement of important resources into corporate, banking, and military sectors. Such influences can amplify the stress in our societies and

work to suppress real solutions and healthy alternatives to the status quo. Yet, this does not need to be so. Better ways *are* possible.

As individuals committed to personal development, we do well to recognize the actions of those who would distract us from our higher values and ideals. If stress and fear are permitted to build within an individual (or a society), they will eventually manifest as physical symptoms and conditions of imbalance. We can do much better than this. It is our unassailable right and ability to choose how we wish to think, feel, and express ourselves. It is well within our power to cultivate spacious, intelligent relaxation and a healthier lifestyle. This is not difficult, but it does take commitment and a willingness to consistently seek more uplifting feelings and means of self-expression.

Building a Healthier Way of Life

Cultivating a foundation of vibrant health is important in the development of dynamic relaxation. The healthier we are, the easier it is to relax. It's as simple as that. As wise qigong practitioners, one of our first objectives is to make sure we have the support we need to maximize our well-being. Nutritious food, sufficient rest, a clean environment, loving relationships, work we enjoy, and healing support when we need it are all parts of a strong and healthy lifestyle.

*"Know yourself.
Do your best.
Make a little progress
every day."
-Master Jou, Tsung Hwa*

Curiously, I have known some experienced qigong practitioners who have used various debilitating drugs or participated in other health compromising practices. On a practical level, such habits lessen the power of our practice. Even "perfect" qigong practice won't benefit us as well if other elements of our life are harmful to our well-being. One has to work harder to compensate for the effects of unhealthy patterns.

² <http://psychcentral.com/news/2013/06/20/70-percent-of-americans-take-prescription-drugs/56275.html>

³ See "Toxic Psychiatry", by Dr Peter Breggin.

On the other hand, continually making choices that support our well-being greatly empowers our practice. Such assessments are not judgmental. They are simply realistic considerations as we pursue greater effectiveness in our lives and in our practice. What follows in this section is largely a discussion of lifestyle. Achieving a more profound level of relaxation and effectiveness is not merely a matter of performing exercises and even the most inspired qigong practice cannot substitute for having a healthy, uplifting way of being in the world.

Qigong is thus correctly seen as a *truly holistic discipline – even a way of life*. It is designed to support your whole self and to better inform and add quality to everything you do. As we proceed, I invite you to look at your life – the parts you like and any that you don't – and consider areas you'd like to change or re-create.

*“There are only two mistakes that can be made along the road to Truth: Not beginning and not going all the way.”
-Attributed to the Buddha*

In *Appendix Four*, there is a simple process you can use to help enhance your lifestyle and experience of well-being. Notice that we do not have to change everything all at once, but rather, as Master Jou advises, “make a little progress every day”, gradually developing ourselves and our lives in the direction we wish to go. The choice is always ours. The way in which we live and refine our lives is our own unique creation. It is our distinctive gift to ourselves and to the world.



Compassionate Self-Inquiry

Because stress is an internal affair, the path to deeper relaxation necessarily involves compassionate self-inquiry, with the emphasis on *compassionate*. I experienced a significant shift in my life when I began to accept my life lessons with appreciation and curiosity, rather than self-judgement. This was, and is, no small thing for me as I find it makes positive change much easier. Life can be constant growth and learning once we grasp that a higher level of self-knowledge and self-expression in no way invalidates who we are – or who we have been. On the contrary, it is only because we are magnificent, brilliant beings that we can embrace higher levels of living at all.

True self-inquiry is compassionate and liberating. It corrects confusions, heals the wounds of our past, enhances the beauty of our lives, and brings people together through forgiveness and recognition of the purity that exists in us all. The principles inherent in qigong, while not at all unique to qigong, support us in self-inquiry and in refining the quality of our living. For instance, there is a dignity in cultivating good posture. Conscious breathing calms our mind and emotions, relaxation allows us to more easily access our wisdom and intuition, focus helps us to energize and achieve what matters to us, and everything is a study of movement both inner and outer. As we continue with this section, I invite you to engage in self-inquiry on whatever level is appropriate for you. And remember that a change toward greater integrity in your life is a way of honoring your true self. Compassionate

*“My religion is to live and die without regret.”
- Milarepa*

self-inquiry engenders healthy humility and care for our soul which is precious beyond measure and worthy of our highest and best efforts, whatever those might be, in any given moment, always.

Body and Mind

From a broad perspective, we can explore deeper levels of relaxation by looking at two basic levels of our life experience: The physical and the non-physical (mental/emotional/spiritual). As we continue to explore self-cultivation, we quite naturally expand our ability to relate to both. What follows are my thoughts on these more personal areas of consideration and how our lifestyle can enhance and empower our practice. As always, I invite you to ponder and come to your own useful conclusions.



I. Relaxation: Physical

It is said that the physical body is the *means* through which we experience life in this world. It is a vehicle or suit for our consciousness and as such it changes according to the way in which our consciousness expresses and experiences life. The implication here is that we are far more than our bodies alone and that consciousness, awareness, is primary.

Not everyone may agree with this, but all can agree that it is a foundational question of human existence. Are we, in fact, more than our bodies, somehow existing beyond perceived physical limitations? In my experience, we are indeed more than our biology. We are more than the intelligent symphony of molecules, cells, tissues, and organs that make up our tangible selves. We are more even than the complex bio-electrical patterns and processes that serve us so well. The idea that we *have* a body but that *we are not limited to it* is an important consideration and one that I feel is worth exploring in the context of qigong.

Hatha yoga was initially developed for the primary purpose of maintaining a healthy, strong body (vehicle) so that the practitioner could more effectively pursue deeper practices of meditation and spiritual development. I believe this is also a worthy goal for us as practitioners of qigong and other internal arts. We can approach our practice with a focus on health and well being and with an intent that our efforts likewise support a deeper cultivation of our authentic self.

Along the way, we may wish to challenge our perspectives of who we are as beings on the most fundamental level. We can do this through contemplation, dialogue, specific qigong exercises, and other means. How deeply we care to take this and the direction we choose in doing so is a matter of personal perspective. But it begins, I believe, with a deep gratitude for our physical bodies and by taking the time to care for them in wise and loving ways, all the while contemplating that *we are more than this*. I continue to grow in my appreciation for my body, as it enables me to cultivate my mind, emotions, and spirit within this amazing physical experience.

Pondering Relaxation: *A practical question to ask yourself through out the day is: "Am I as relaxed as I can be?" If the answer is 'no', then ask, "How can I become more relaxed and at ease in this moment?" Listen to what information bubbles up from your subconscious. You might notice that you're thirsty or need to stretch or take a break or accomplish some particular task so that you can feel better going forward. Part of the solution to stress lies in attending, sometimes creatively, to what we genuinely need so that we can relax and function more easily and happily.*

Song

The Chinese word *song* speaks to the quality of physical relaxation. It can be translated as to loosen, to let go, or to release, as in to loosen a knot or to free up areas of holding, stuck-ness or adhesion. Envision a horse's mane that is matted and tangled in places as akin to a state of stress and tension. Now imagine that same horse's mane after being combed and brushed until it is untangled, smooth, and clear. You could run your fingers through such a mane with ease and yet the hair remains quite strong. We can achieve a similar quality of being untangled, smooth, and clear. We might also notice that we are much stronger when we are relaxed than when we are tight and constricted. This sense of looseness and ease is *song*.

There is a sense of lengthening within *song*. This applies especially to our body's joints. There can be an instinctual tendency to contract our muscles and constrict our joints in reaction to various stresses in life. This can be quite subtle as in a slight contraction when certain topics come up in conversation, or more intense as when feeling frightened by a loud noise. As qigong practitioners, however, we want to master relaxation and *lengthen* through our joints, within proper alignment. We want to release tension and lengthen through our neck, through our spine, shoulders, arms, and so on. Such lengthening supports deeper relaxation, easier breathing, and a more balanced, upright posture. (See *Appendix One* for a warm up sequence that emphasizes and develops this quality of *song* in the body. It is useful as a stand alone practice or can be used prior to more traditional qigong sets.)

A Universe of Sensation: As you may have noticed, relaxation is not a dull, lethargic state. Rather, with deeper levels of relaxation, worlds of fine sensation open up. One comes to feel subtle energy flows, quiet vibrations, connections and communications of all sorts. Information that was previously unconscious begins to emerge into an awareness that is no longer encumbered with tensions and distractions. In this way, relaxation is an essential component of deeper meditation and the development of higher levels of consciousness. Plus... it feels good!

We can, in fact, train ourselves to respond to stress with relaxation, with deep breathing, and with a calm sense of presence that is better able to address whatever is occurring in our space. It takes practice, but we have this capacity.

As we become more physically aware, our ability to relax continues to improve and we can more easily notice areas of unnecessary tightness in the body. This awareness is wonderful and enables us to notice even more subtle areas of tension, both physical and non-physical. We can then release these areas and relax on still deeper levels while experiencing greater ease, coordination, and well-being as a result. There seems to be no limit to how accomplished we can become in this regard.

As mentioned above, the first step to letting go of unnecessary tension is to realize that we can. The next step is quite simply to think about it often. Make “feeling good” a conscious priority and allow your body and mind to teach you how to relax easily and deeply. Later in this section we'll look at the practice of progressive relaxation, but let's first address some often overlooked areas through which we can make faster, more meaningful progress on the level of physical health. Remember, the healthier we are, the easier it is to relax and improve ourselves on many levels.

A Great Place to Start

One of the easiest things for most of us to improve upon in the health category is water intake. Consider these words from Dr. Andrew Weil (emphasis mine):

"Water is great medicine, needed to maintain a healthy body, a clear mind, and a good balance within your tissues... About 60 percent of your body is water, and you must constantly replenish the supply as it's used up in the processes of life... When you don't have enough water in your body, your cells start to draw water from the bloodstream. The blood gets sludgy, your heart has to work harder, and your body starts to redirect blood away from less vital areas. Dehydration can set in even before you start to feel thirsty. This is a great strain on the body because it impairs the kidneys in their vital function of purifying the blood and helping the body to get rid of toxins."⁴

I doubt this comes as a great surprise to anyone. We all know we should drink plenty of water⁵ each day, but how many of us tend to slack a bit on this one? Yet, this is one of the most important things we can do to upgrade our health and add potency to our practice. Chi is closely related to the blood, so any imbalance in the blood will affect the flow and quality of our chi. Likewise, water is a conductor of electricity and facilitates the movement of energy in our body.

A common recommendation is that we shoot for at least eight 8-ounce glasses per day. This amount is not etched in stone, but it gives you a number to work with. Make sure your water is from a high quality bottled source or from your home purification system, preferably a solid carbon block or reverse-osmosis system. If you do this consistently, you will surely notice a difference in how you feel and in how well you move. Also be sure you are well hydrated before beginning any extensive qigong practice. This is key.

A Word About Fluoride:

If the subject is new to you, I suggest that you research water fluoridation. Note that this is a somewhat charged issue, but an important one. Fluoridation is an attempt at "forced medication" with a substance that is arguably harmful to ingest. If your community fluoridates its water and you want to remove it, make sure your home filter works for fluoride. Last I checked, only reverse-osmosis systems were effective at this.

Physical Fitness

An important part of our overall state of health and well-being is our level of physical fitness. This includes our body's endurance, strength, flexibility, and coordination. The more physically fit we are, the stronger and more resilient our cells, tissues, and organs tend to be and the less stress we tend to store. All this supports our ability to relax more deeply and more effectively cultivate our chi. **The more physically fit we are, the more effective our qigong practice can become.** This is a secret of energy cultivation that is sometimes overlooked.

As your experience with qigong advances, regular practice alone *may* be enough to maintain and improve your fitness level. Some advanced qigong practices can be very dynamic and physically challenging. If practiced regularly and with clear intent, they will surely help improve your fitness level. However, I still strongly encourage cross training. I regularly do yoga, cardiovascular, and weight training exercises to support my qigong and Taiji practice. I also enjoy vigorous hikes in the beautiful Cascade mountains near where I live. In the process, I apply the principles we are discussing in this course: good posture, breathing, *song* relaxation, mental/emotional focus, etc. In fact, we could easily broaden our definition of qigong to include a wide variety of fitness building activities so long as they are consistent with our core principles.

⁴ *Natural Health, Natural Medicine*, by Dr. Andrew Weil

⁵ Please note that water here means filtered, non-fluoridated normal old fashioned water. Coffee, tea, juices, or carbonated drinks won't take the place of water when it comes to effectively hydrating the body.

A useful way to think of more traditional fitness exercise is that it provides a kind of raw, less developed energy that invigorates and gives us more to work with when doing the more sophisticated practices of qigong. Most people tend to notice that when they do some sort of regular intelligent exercise, they feel happier, healthier, and have more energy in their lives.

Suggestion: Use at least one other form of regular exercise to support your qigong practice.

We can then take that energized good feeling into our practice of qigong and produce even greater results. Be creative, use your imagination, and have fun with what you do. If you are new to regular exercise, I suggest that you begin by simply choosing one form of aerobic activity to supplement your qigong practice. It can be as simple as brisk walking, biking, swimming, using a mini-trampoline (see *Appendix Five*), etc. Whatever you *enjoy* doing is the way to go. Ideally, add this to your schedule so that you get at least *20 minutes of exercise 3 times per week*.

Remember to listen to your body and exercise at a level that feels genuinely good to you, no need to overdo it. We are taking moderate consistency here. Often in as little as 1-2 weeks, you will begin to notice more energy, a greater ability to relax, and you will go deeper into your practice of qigong. Guaranteed! You can find more information on fitness building and general well-being on our website.



II. Relaxation: Non-Physical

Even more relevant to the subject of relaxation is our state of mind. A person who dwells on thoughts of love, purpose, and possibility will be more at ease and in greater harmony than one steeped in thoughts of limitation, conflict, and struggle. It is also known that the content of our minds directly impacts the health of our bodies. Recent research (as reported by Deepak Chopra, Greg Braden, and many others) suggests that with each thought we think there is a corresponding chemical change in the body reflecting the character of that thought. For instance, if we *focus* on thoughts of fear and anger we produce chemicals in the body that cause cellular damage. On the other hand, when we focus on such qualities as love, creativity, and gratitude we produce chemicals that support cellular healing and healthy development.⁶

Thoughts, Belief, Experience

At a basic level, our thoughts produce emotions and our emotions cause chemical *and* energetic changes that effect our bodies – either detrimentally or beneficially. Because of this relationship, if we wish to elevate our feelings, release stress, and achieve optimal health and aliveness, it is important to elevate the quality of our thinking. This is the discipline of actively choosing what sort of thoughts and ideas we *dwell* upon and *energize* (with further thought and emotion.) This is a pivotal point and cannot be overstated as it effects everything else in our lives.

*“To do qigong is not enough. It is more important to temper the mind.”
- Huixian Chen*

Enter the tricky subject of beliefs. Beliefs are essentially dominant thought patterns. They are *habits* of thinking, conditioned ways of perceiving and relating to ourselves and the world. It is important to note, however, that our beliefs can be, and often are, incorrect or incomplete. They can thus cause problems as we try to navigate through a world that is constantly changing and in ways that can disagree with even long cherished beliefs.

⁶ I highly recommend Gregg Braden's book *Deep Truth*, if for no other reason than to challenge many of our currently held cultural beliefs.

Have you noticed that a majority of communications have to do with someone trying to persuade someone else what they should believe? From advertising to political speeches to music and movies to the casual conversation by the water cooler, communication is largely the attempt to create belief in the listener. What party should we vote for? How should I feel about the economy, my neighbors, that other country, history, food... everything. In this sense, every thought or idea that comes to us is an *invitation* we can either accept or dismiss, and we have the right to do either. As adults, our choices of thought lead to or reinforce our beliefs, which in turn produce our feelings, and so influence our experiences.

This cycle of thought (belief) → emotion → experience can, if left to the unconscious, have the effect of perpetuating old and often outdated patterns, limiting us in many unnecessary ways. But *thought* is the foundation and it is in our best interest to question our dominant thought patterns and see if they are indeed how we wish to purposefully experience and express in life. If they are not, we have an opportunity to *reach for a higher thought, a broader, perhaps brighter perspective.*

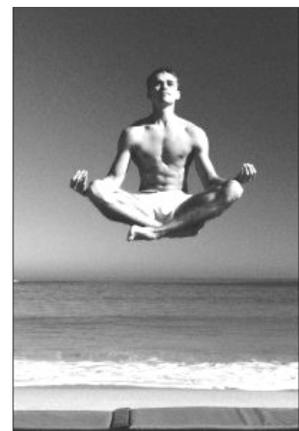
“Every thought or idea that comes to us is an invitation we can either accept or dismiss, and we have the right to do either.”

Note that there are many ways of “upgrading” old thought patterns or changing outdated belief systems.⁷ We'll look at a few methods later in this section. A key to it all, however, is to consistently think in a direction that feels good to you, honors your sense of integrity, and gives you a greater sense of spaciousness and well-being. Changes need not happen all at once, but we can *move in progressively better directions with our thoughts and be gentle with ourselves in the process...*

The relationship of thought to feeling can then work in our favor. If we are feeling badly, with a little discipline, we can change our point of focus, sometimes just a bit, and so begin to feel better. If we are already feeling good, with a further shift in thinking, we are soon feeling even better and more positively influencing the world around us. Consistently upgrading the quality of our conscious point of focus can eventually upgrade our beliefs bringing us into happier, more elevated states of being. I feel there is no limit to how far we can go with this.

Many of you will have noticed that your day progresses much better when the content of your mind is life affirming. More opportunities arise, relationships are more satisfying, projects proceed with less effort, and if difficult situations do occur, they are more easily handled. We can literally transform our energy and the quality of our day in the twinkling of a thought. Thus assessing the content of our mind and how we use it is fair game and encouraged within the study of qigong.

Next, let's consider two major factors that influence our mind and how we can work with them to create more beneficial and supportive ways of thinking. The first area is the nature of belief itself; the second is the influence of our environment. We'll look at each in turn.



What are we capable of?

Revisiting Our Beliefs

In the movie *The Matrix*, the character Morpheus attempts to show the younger Neo that he has vast untapped abilities. Neo, however, is steeped in ideas about his own limitations. The problem he faces is not a question of what he actually *can* do; it is a question of what he *believes* he can do. This dilemma

⁷ Three excellent professional modalities for clearing outdated belief patterns are Theta Healing, Transpersonal Hypnotherapy, and Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT). Visit our website for more information on these.

has been illustrated time and again and its resolution is a key to peak effectiveness in qigong and all else.

I was working with a relatively new Taiji student once. She was making nice progress, but was still missing a certain depth to what she was doing. After a little thought, I suggested she take a moment to imagine that she was now herself 5 years in the future. She has been doing Taiji practice each day of those 5 years and was mastering it beautifully. Imagine how that feels, I suggested, and do your form again. She enthusiastically agreed and the difference was fascinating. She sunk into her stance, her breath deepened, her shoulders dropped, her posture had better alignment, and her movement was more coordinated and alive! She *was* her more masterful, future self! All it took was for her to consider a greater possibility and then grant herself “permission” to be better than she thought she *should* be. It was a beautiful moment.

The field of hypnosis also offers us examples of how a simple change in perspective can profoundly alter one's experience. Hypnotherapist David Calof tells of a 14 year old boy who was told that his sense of smell was increased a thousand-fold. Mr Calof then blindfolded him, walked several paces away and placed a tick tack in his own right hand and held out both arms to the sides. He then asked the boy what he was holding and in which hand. The boy replied, still blindfolded, that it was peppermint and pointed to the correct hand in which it was held.⁸ All this and much more truly begs the question: What *are* we capable of?

We do well to regularly ponder the truth and usefulness of our beliefs. Our beliefs, resulting from our interpretation of past events and social conditioning, are arguably the strongest factor influencing our current thoughts, and, in turn, our lives. We tend to think and feel according to what we believe and *what we do* or *don't do* is the result. New experiences are further *interpreted* according to how we believe, think, and feel about them. All this can create a somewhat stagnant and self-perpetuating cycle – *unless we are in the practice of consciously and kindly examining our inner world and outer life*. By so doing, we can create momentum for continually upgrading our beliefs, moving through life in a sort of philosophical upward spiral.

The alternative is to assume that right now we know all there is for us to know about ourselves, others, and life in general. This, of course, is the kiss of death to personal growth and evolution. As qigong practitioners, one of our priorities can be to explore the heights of our own potential and allow our beliefs to change according to what we discover. This invites a level of open-mindedness and curiosity about life – both internally and externally. It engages the spirit of an explorer who gladly realizes that much still exists in the unknown and that our potential is truly boundless. Such a person graciously acknowledges that life is greater than we have yet to realize and in so doing more easily cultivates higher levels of mastery.

With the spirit of an explorer we can likewise see that some of our beliefs are helpful while others are a hindrance. Let us welcome the task of releasing the hindrances with ease and grace, while strengthening those perspectives that help us to move forward. Determining exactly which are which is a personal matter and the subject of many other works. For now, however, I'll offer a few suggestions that have been helpful in my own experience:

*“Feelings come and go like clouds in a windy sky. Conscious breathing is my anchor.”
Thich Nhat Hanh*

► *Consider Your Daily Thoughts.* What do you tend think about and in what way? What sort of

8 *Hypnotic Techniques*, lecture series by David Calof

thoughts do you actively bring to mind and what sort seem to arise as if on their own? You may wish to take a period of time to closely attend to your thoughts, writing down the primary themes you notice in a notebook you carry with you. Once we see our tendencies for what they are, simply tendencies, we are in a place to more easily make conscious decisions about which thoughts we choose to further entertain and which we can simply dismiss. It is good discipline to choose those thoughts that most closely match our stated goals and core values.

▶ *Examine Specific Beliefs.* Ask yourself, “What do I believe about ___” and “Is this really true?” Useful topics to explore may include beliefs around relationship, family, religion, politics, society, health, and money. Reconsider your beliefs according to your current wisdom, logic, and intuition. Some beliefs and thought patterns totally defy reason, yet they remain. They are the remnants of past hurts and misunderstanding and as such do not serve our progress in the present. Release them in favor of thoughts that focus on what you truly value and appreciate today.

▶ *Move Beyond Negative Thinking.* Notice especially, any patterns of thinking that lower your energy level or cause you to constrict. In my experience, any idea that diminishes us, or another, in any way is either untrue or it is incomplete. Instead, we can train ourselves to seek a higher perspective and feel our energy rise as a result.

▶ *Read and Ponder.* Regularly treat yourself to uplifting points of view, new and traditional teachings, and meaningful, uplifting dialogue with others. Cultivate your powers of reason and intuition in evaluating everything.

▶ *The Substitution Game:* As practitioners of qigong, we want to become as life-affirming as we can. An inner game I often play is to replace any negative or unsupportive thought (of myself or another) with a positive one as long as I can genuinely support that idea. Of particular significance are any “I can’t...” type thoughts. Replace immediately with a definite “I can...” thought, even if it relates to a different subject. With regard to others, if you catch a negative thought or attitude toward someone, see if you can truly shift your energy/feeling tone to one of good will toward that person. Then notice how you feel afterward. Our chi literally expands with the embrace of *authentic* affirmative thinking.

▶ *Use Resonant Affirmations.* Consider using a set of uplifting affirmations which reflect your goals and values on a regular basis. I have found this to be quite effective when done correctly. The key is inner resonance. We must be in both intellectual and energetic agreement with the words we use. When we use an affirmation, we want to feel an energetic rise, a lift in our sense of well-being on some level, even if it is subtle.⁹

▶ *The “Office” of Your Mind.* Consider your mind as you would your office. How bright and clear, spacious, efficient, and peaceful can you create the office of your mind?

▶ *Ponder...* It is said that pessimism is merely the harbor of an undisciplined mind. To the realist, life exists moment-by-moment in endless curiosity, breathtaking beauty, and infinite unfolding possibility.

A Healthy Environment

The second major factor that affects the content and functioning of our mind is our environment. Everything around us is an influence: people, food, places, books, music, chemicals, everything. This is

⁹ Visit www.fullcirclearts.net for a free download on writing resonant affirmations.

an important point to ponder deeply. What we expose ourselves to and dwell within, influences us directly – sometimes with immediate, obvious effect, other times more slowly and subtly. But everything has an energy, an “attitude”, that influences us in one way or another.

Consider this on a very personal level. You might ponder the movies or television you watch, the material you read, the music you listen to, the people you work and hang out with, the kind of dialogue you engage in... An excellent way to gauge whether something is beneficial for you or not is to notice how you are feeling. Let’s use the TV news as an example. Generally speaking, the current vibe of American news broadcasts is quite low. It tends to focus on superficial issues, gross negativity, and one-dimensional, sound-byte perspectives. For many people, the news is a dramatically negative influence causing a drop in energy level, a dulling of the mind, and even a subtle sense of depression. If you regularly watch the news, try this experiment: go off it for a month and see how you feel. I doubt you’ll go back.

Regular qigong practice will increase your sensitivity on many levels.

Regular qigong practice will, most definitely, increase your sensitivity on many levels. As you become more sensitive to the influences of your surroundings, it may become helpful to make certain adjustments to your environment. This isn’t to say that we can’t override environmental influences if we wish to. We do have the ability to choose how we feel by relaxing and directing our thought and this is surely worth developing. But given the choice, it is wise to place ourselves in surroundings that support our progress as much as possible.

Just as we make dietary choices for our body, we make dietary choices for our mind. We can either feed ourselves “junk food” or content that makes us stronger, wiser, and happier. The choice is ours. It will affect our success in qigong and everything else. Consider your environment on all levels and ask yourself: “How can I create an even more life affirming environment for myself?” And perhaps, “How can I create a healthier, more uplifting environment for those around me?” From the spaces we live and work in to the types of interactions we engage in through the day, and all stops in between, everything has the capacity to be upgraded in ways both subtle and dramatic – so long as it supports our genuine well-being.

Progressive Relaxation

Now, we’ll shift gears a bit and look at a specific technique to help us relax during our daily practice. *Progressive Relaxation* is an easy and effective technique that fits nicely into our work with breathing and posture. We’ll begin in a more passive, comfortable position and go from there.

To learn this, start by lying on your back on a comfortable surface: your bed, a couch, a hammock, even the floor if that works for you. You may want to place a pillow under your knees to better support your low back. Once you practice this a few times lying down, we’ll add progressive relaxation to your sitting practice and standing practice.



Ah... that's the stuff!

We begin by mentally focusing on each part of your body in turn, bringing an awareness of ease and effortlessness to each area and then moving on. You’ll find that the breath work we’ve done so far will support and blend seamlessly with this process. A typical sequence for this technique would move from

top to bottom and go something like this:

Make yourself comfortable, softly focus your attention, and:

* *Inhale* ... then *exhale* and relax the top of your head, back of your head, around to your forehead.

* *Inhale* ... then *exhale* and relax your eyes, temples, cheeks, jaw, and mouth.

* *Inhale* ... then *exhale* and relax your neck and throat.

* *Inhale* ... then *exhale* and relax your shoulders, down your arms, to your hands, to finger tips.

* *Inhale* ... then *exhale* and relax your upper back, middle back, and lower back.

* *Inhale* ... then *exhale* and relax your chest, your solar plexus region, and abdomen.

* *Inhale* ... then *exhale* and relax your lower abdomen, pelvic region, hips, and buttocks

* *Inhale* ... then *exhale* and relax your thighs.

* *Inhale* ... then *exhale* and relax your knees and calves.

* *Inhale* ... then *exhale* and relax your ankles, then your feet, out to the tips of the toes.

* *Inhale* ... then *exhale* and focus on relaxing your whole body as a single unit.

* *Inhale* ... then *exhale* and relax even into the space around you as far out as you care to extend your awareness.

This last part is important and involves a bit of imagination, but it can make a big difference in your experience. It is great for expanding our sense of ease and presence beyond the physical body. It also helps cultivate our sense of connection and attention to the world around us.

Tips for Practicing Progressive Relaxation

► Think both at and below the surface of the area you are working with. For instance, when relaxing your chest, first place your attention on the superficial region and then go beneath that with your awareness. You can simply focus on the area under your chest or you can get specific with the deeper muscles, lungs, heart, etc. If you are a particularly visual person, you may find it helpful to visualize the deeper areas and see them releasing. A few anatomy charts will help give you an idea of what your tissues and organs look like on the inside. With a little practice, you will develop a more thorough sense of your body and this will increase your capacity to relax more deeply into your body.

► Often when focusing on a particular part of the body we become aware of warmth or a sense of tingling or fine vibration. Attuning yourself to these sensations can help the relaxation process go deeper.

► You may find it helpful to speak each region to yourself as you go, and move on when your experience a shift toward greater release and comfort. For example, say to yourself, “My neck and throat relax.”. When you feel a greater sense of ease there, continue with, “My shoulders, arms, and hands relax” and so on. *With this develop an intuitive rhythm in your timing of breathing and relaxing each area.*

► Note that you don't have to use the sequence given above. It follows a logical flow, but you can organize how you progress in any way that works best for you. You can be very specific with your focus such as on particular muscles, organs, etc... or you can use large regions – head, torso, arms, etc. You can likewise take as little or as much time as you wish to complete this process. But do feel for a shift, even a small one, before you move on to the next area. I do recommend that you stick with just one approach for a while, then experiment as you gain experience.

► Feel free to move or slightly tense the part of the body you are working with, then release even more

completely. This can often be helpful in achieving a deeper level of relaxation.

► This whole process can be done as a kind of easy, enjoyable body scan, happening in a gentle wave of awareness. As you get better at this, it all becomes much more effortless and simply directing your attention to an area will be enough to help it to relax. All of these processes are best approached with a light heart. Have fun with them, feel good with them, and your results will be all the better.

A Short-Hand Relaxation Process

With a little practice, you can use a short hand version of Progressive Relaxation. As we learn deeper levels of ease and relaxation, your body will remember the feeling and how to achieve it making it easier to approximate this quality anywhere, anytime, whether you are standing in line at a grocery store, having a conversation at the office, or taking a leisurely stroll through the park.

Use this simple process or create your own. Repeat to yourself the word “*Relax*” or “*Song*”, as your awareness moves in a wave through 3 simple steps:

1. Breathe deeply and relax: head, chest, arms, belly, back, hips, legs, down to feet. <pause>
2. Breathe deeply and relax whole body as a single unit. <pause>
3. Breathe deeply and relax into the space around you.

In the next section we'll see how deep relaxation blends nicely with a practice called the Inner Smile and much more...

Quick Review

1. One of the most important principles in this course, by far, is that of Dynamic Relaxation. The more thoroughly we cultivate this, the easier everything else becomes.
2. Dynamic Relaxation is about our ability to be both highly effective and genuinely at ease in the world. It is a quality of physical intelligence and looseness that supports our ability to engage life in an open and present manner.
3. Dynamic Relaxation is a multidimensional attribute involving the body, the mind, and the spirit. It is a key to higher levels of personal mastery.
4. Relaxation in general has very beneficial, quantifiable effects on the physical body.
5. Our ability to relax improves as our health, fitness, and lifestyle improves.
6. The thoughts we entertain influence how well we can relax and focus on what we truly value. It is to our advantage to examine and improve how we use our mind on a daily basis.
7. The process of self-mastery involves kindly supporting ourselves and continually refining the quality of our surroundings to better reflect our values. This is especially important to us as the practice of qigong heightens our sensitivity to our environment.
8. Progressive Relaxation, whether done in a passive, supine position or in an active sitting or standing position, is a great tool for releasing unnecessary tension on progressively deeper levels.
9. We can practice dynamic relaxation anytime, anywhere by simply repeating the word “relax” or “song”, breathing, and letting go. With a little practice, all it takes is a reminder.
10. Practice your qigong as if you were a force of nature, for in truth, you are.

Action Plan for Chapter Five

1. Suggestion: With notebook in hand, read through this weeks lesson a second time and take note of those areas which either resonate with you or to which you feel any resistance. Write a few sentences

on each area until you feel that you have achieved a higher level of clarity, even you disagree with my perspective. Our objective in qigong is not to entrench anyone's point of view, but rather to refine, clarify, and evolve ideas that you personally find empowering and uplifting.

2. Daily Practice: Play with the technique of Progressive Relaxation in both a supine and a sitting position while allowing yourself to relax more thoroughly and comfortably than you have in the past. When you are ready, add Progressive Relaxation to your practice of Zhan Zhuang. Spend a little time first establishing a comfortable rhythm with your breathing and then use this to facilitate your relaxation in a sitting position. Continue this same approach of posture to breathing to relaxation when you move to a standing position.

3. Consider your lifestyle and living environment. Does your life reflect and honor all that you love and value as well as it might? Does your environment support your well being and your progress? How can you improve on what you have created for yourself? In *Appendix Four* you'll find a tool to help you assess where you are and focus on any changes you may wish to create for yourself now and in the future. You can, of course, also create your own approach. The key is to assess and create changes in ways that are non-judgmental and supportive to you going forward.

4. Begin to notice more and more how you feel as go through your day. Periodically, ask yourself the question: "Am I as relaxed as I can be?" given what you are doing. If the answer is no, ask yourself what you need to do to become more at ease. You may need to adjust your posture, get up from your desk and stretch out a little, drink some water, whatever it takes to achieve a deeper level of ease and presence in *this* moment. In *Appendix Six*, I've also included an alternative 3-Minute Relaxation Process that can be done anytime, anywhere to relax and re-center. As always, use what works best for you.