



# Orchard Kung Fu



*The Martial Way of Vitality*

## **Meditation for Health**

Meditation is a catch-all term used in the English language to refer to a staggering variety of methods used around the world for a variety of purposes. When considering whether you should take up a meditative practice, you should have some idea of what you hope to accomplish and whether the method chosen will meet your needs. There are three major purposes to which meditation may be applied. The most common purpose of meditation in the Far East is spiritual advancement. In our culture, many people are first introduced to meditation to develop general health and for relief from specific medical conditions. Finally, martial artists are famous for using meditation to enhance their combat effectiveness. Unfortunately, the outer trappings and inner experiences of the methods used to achieve these three purposes can overlap significantly. This has led to an alarming degree of confusion in practitioners around the world as they try to match their experiences to the often eclectic practices of their teachers. I see students trying to develop martial power by practicing mantra meditations, while students who wish to decrease their blood pressure spend inordinate amounts of time reaching for higher states of consciousness.

In the West, scientists focus primarily on the physical health benefits of meditation because it is possible to measure physiological changes in the body. There is some concentration on the physical performance-enhancing aspects of meditation for athletes but a greater emphasis is placed on the benefits to one's mental game. In the past two decades, complementary health practices and integrative medicine have started to focus on the holistic psycho-spiritual benefits of various meditative techniques. You must clearly set out your intent before you begin your practice.

Taking a brief look at scientific documentation, it is unquestionable that quiet meditation has many positive bodily health benefits. Among experienced meditators, cardiovascular changes include reduced heart rates, increased blood flow to the brain, decreased blood pressure, and lessening of angina pain. The brain physically increases in thickness, demonstrates electrical activity consistent with relaxed states of mind, and increased hemispheric coherence. The respiratory system becomes more efficient, displaying a reduced respiratory rate, decreased oxygen consumption and decreased carbon dioxide production. Muscle tension decreases. In general, stress hormone levels decrease while neuropeptides associated with relaxation and recuperation increase. The immune system demonstrates increased efficiency and function. Cholesterol and blood sugar levels can be lowered. Breathing troubles decrease. Pain is reduced.

Scientific studies also demonstrate clear improvements in the cognitive health of meditators. Perceptual awareness is heightened, emotional lability is decreased, quality of sleep improves, sensory acuity and receptivity increases, reaction time improves, balance is enhanced, fewer intrusions of irrelevant thoughts occur, concentration improves, and creativity is enhanced. Behaviourally, meditators develop equanimity, improved energy levels, improved self-esteem, a more accurate self-image, and increased empathy.

Perhaps the most valuable benefit of meditation for health is its efficacy in reducing stress responses in the meditator. Stressors may be defined as pretty much anything that your body or mind perceives. How you interpret the stressor determines the effect of the stressor on your body and mind. Breathing rate, degree of muscular tension, mental agitation, and emotional equanimity are closely intertwined. Relaxing the body slows the breath, clears the mind and calms the emotions. Breathing diaphragmatically relaxes the muscles, releases emotional tension, and slows thought processes. On the other hand, if you are worried about something, you have circular, unproductive thought



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patterns, a more agitated emotional state, increased physical tension, and you begin to breathe more shallowly. In other words, and this is very important, what you think changes your physiology, and what you do can change your thoughts and emotions!

At Orchard Kung Fu, we teach a holistic system, Daoqiquan, the Martial Way of Vitality, that contains several martial arts (Jiulong Baguazhang, Liu Taijiquan, Ziran Xingyiquan, Tibetan Coiling Serpent Boxing, Tibetan Blue Heron Boxing) and several health and vitality methods (Spring Rain Qigong, Flying Dragon Qigong, Spirit Sword Qigong, Awakening Dragon Dao Yin, Golden Vigour Qigong, Nine healing Circles Qigong, Long Feng Shui Qigong). Initially, students of both martial arts and health and vitality methods will begin meditating in the same manner. Proper posture must be cultivated, diaphragmatic breathing must be trained, skill must be developed at releasing tension, awareness is refined, concentration is seeded, thoughts are settled, intent is focused, and, finally, the power of the mind is ready to be harnessed and constructively directed via specific visualizations. Students train these stages via a form of meditation we call Quiet Sitting.

The first stage of Quiet Sitting is cultivating posture. Developing good sitting posture is essential to breathe properly, release muscular tension, and enhance circulation. Slumping is unacceptable if health is a goal. You are looking to balance the body in a way that uses the muscles and skeleton most efficiently. Initially, you may find it uncomfortable because your muscles have not developed the strength and endurance required to maintain correct posture. Many meditators slouch in a manner that is detrimental to their health, compressing internal organs, reducing circulation, decreasing respiratory function, increasing ligament stress and muscular tension. If their goal is a health practice, they have fallen far from the mark! Concentrate on establishing upright posture while sitting, standing, and walking for one to six months. Correct alignment must come first, then development of endurance, and then relaxation in the posture and the release of any muscular tension that is not required to maintain the posture. Practice until this becomes your regular, everyday posture.

The subsequent stages will provide deeper benefits as you continue training your mind and body. And yet, even this level of practice will generate health benefits for the diligent student.

Transform your life; begin Quiet Sitting soon!

Dr. Yancy Orchard