

Basic Meridian Stretches

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Meridian stretches help to open the meridians by combining specific stretches with awareness and breath. Shizuto Masunaga assigned letters to these stretches to make them easier to remember. Masunaga Sensei's books offer excellent details on meridian stretching information, the basic stretches, and other stretches. "*Meridian Exercises: The Oriental Way to Health and Vitality*" and "*Zen Imagery Exercises: Meridian Exercises for Wholesome Living*" by Masunaga, Shizuto.

Practice daily. We found that a few minutes a day, as a family activity or alone, yielded quick results. You don't have to do it at the same time each day. While you can do this series in five minutes, allow ten to get more benefit. To reduce the time of the routine, you can exclude "p" and "q" however, you lose the benefits of better synchronization of breath and movements. Also, stretching the Conception Vessel stimulates all the Yin meridians, and stretching the Governor Vessel stimulates all the Yang meridians.

Masunaga Sensei stressed the importance of getting a feel of the meridians as a "living sensation", rather than something depicted in diagrams. As you move from one posture to the next, try to make the movement smooth, paying particular attention to how it feels. Continually bring awareness to your breathing, being sensitive to how your body responds.

The movement into a posture will naturally come to a stop where your body is stretched to the limit. Pause here and inhale. Your body will begin to tighten up from your belly out to your limbs. Instead of forcing a stretch, simply exhale until you are completely empty. When you reach this point, let go one last time; you will relax more along the line of tension, you will stretch a little bit farther. The relaxation and stretching effect tapers off after repeating this breathing and stretching sequence about two or three times. When this happens, slowly return to the starting position.

By sensing the line of tension that forms in your body, you can actually experience the meridians. This line of tension or stretch may feel like a pulling sensation in the muscles. Releasing this tension with slow exhalations gives you a feel for achieving total relaxation. You will not achieve this relaxation if you try to bend as far as you can before attempting the slow exhalations.

Do not force a stretch. Instead, allow the stretch to happen a little bit at a time with each exhalation. Inhale after each complete exhalation. As you inhale, you will feel an increase of tension where you felt slight relaxation on the exhalation. Remain in the position and feel the lines of tension after taking a deep breath, and then slowly let your breath out. Do not force yourself into the ideal position. The ideal position is just a goal. As you continue practicing, each day your position will more closely resemble the ideal position.

How much you are able to relax with each exhalation depends entirely on the depth and smoothness of your breathing. You won't be able to tell the difference between tension and relaxation in the meridians if you strain with your breath. Keep your awareness on your breath and any physical sensations. If your breathing gets out of control, back off a little bit on the depth of the stretch until you notice that you can control your breathing.

Some forms of exercise are designed to increase circulation by working the muscles and joints. They emphasize getting the form right. Meridian stretches also require conscious

control to get the body into each position. But once the position is reached, the object is to let go, breathe, and observe what goes on in your body. When breathing in, tension increases naturally and this tension is most pronounced along certain lines. At times, this sensation extends from one end of the body to the other. It is most important that you experience the meridians as something distinct from muscles and nerves.

"Z" and "I" (Starting/resting Positions)

Start with "Z". Lie down on your back, arms to your sides, palms up, heels together, toes fall away from each other. This is the same as the yoga posture called *Savasana*, (dead man posture or corpse posture). Relax. Do this posture at the beginning and in between each A-D posture for at least as long as it takes to complete several deep and relaxed breaths.

Stand up into "I" and continue breathing the same way. Stand relaxed with your feet slightly more than shoulder width apart and place your hands over your umbilicus to help you feel your breath. Feel the energy for movement coming up from your feet. Then, look for a sensation extending from a point just below the navel down to your feet. Move on to "p".

"p" and "q" (Conception and Governor Vessels)

Move your belly forward as you lean back, placing both hands against the back of your thighs in a relaxed way to give support. Let your head tilt all the way back. Picture this meridian as a line of tension produced when you lean back with your belly pushed forward.

Moving into "q". After you have leaned back to stretch the Conception Vessel ("p"), imagine that you are moving your belly toward your back. Next, bend forward as if you were trying to put your head between your legs and reach both arms around your thighs. Picture this meridian (Governor vessel) as a line of down the center of your back. Inhale; feel the line of tension. Exhale; release Ki and feel your body relax.

In stretching the Conception Vessel "p", the belly is pushed forward and the chest is expanded so, in effect, you open yourself up to the outside and release Ki. In stretching the Governor Vessel, you bend forward at the waist and place your hands around your thighs so that your face is hidden and your energy is drawn inward. These two stretches represent the two most basic functions of life where the force of Ki is directed either to the inside or to the outside (i.e., drawing in or reaching out).

"A" (Lung and Large Intestine Meridians)

Stand with your feet slightly more than shoulder width apart. The tips of your toes should point naturally outward. Put your hands behind your back with the palms facing backward, and hold them together by hooking your thumbs together. Spread your fingers out so that your fingers point as much as possible in opposite directions. Keep your knees straight and think of your weight as going mostly on the base of your little toes and bend forward as you exhale. Stretch both arms over yourself, keeping your elbows straight. When your body is stretched forward as far as it will go, quietly begin to inhale. A line of tension or stiffness will be felt along the back of your legs, abdomen, back, and arms. As you inhale, feel the lines of tension develop. When you try to draw your arms forward by your own effort, the muscles become unnecessarily tense and the real line of tension becomes indistinct and hard to feel. Instead, imagine that your arms are being pulled forward by someone else. Compare your stance with that of the picture. If any strength is

brought to bear on one part in particular, this will prevent you from feeling the meridian lines. It is important that you hold the mental image of Ki energy flowing from the center point of your belly out to your arms and legs.

Repeat this breathing and relaxation about three times then, slowly return to the upright position.

"B" (Spleen and Stomach Meridians)

Sit on your feet then, slowly lean backward. As you lean down to the rear, move your feet apart, out from under your buttocks so that your buttocks come to rest on the floor. If your knees rise off the floor when laying all the way back, do not force them down to the floor. Just keep your lower legs out to your side next to your hips so that you can keep your knees close together. After your back and shoulders are resting on the floor, stretch both arms over your head, interlace your fingers, and turn the palms toward your head. Next breathe in and stretch your whole body so that it extends and straightens. This will naturally cause your back to rise up off the floor and your knees to spread apart. Feel and picture the lines of tension that form down the front of your body, along your spine, as well as on both sides of the arms. If you are not able to lay back, just hang out and follow the breathing instructions.

If you let your knees spread far, your back will reach the floor quite easily, but the meridians will not be stretched fully. While your knees do not have to be kept together rigidly, you should try to keep them together as much as you can without undue effort. To make this easier, keep your feet out from under your buttocks and keep your back and hips against the floor. Once you get a good stretch all the way through your body, quietly breathe out as you relax your effort, and feel your whole body relax.

"C" (Heart and Small Intestine Meridians)

Sit on the floor and place the soles of your feet together in front of you by bending both knees out to the side. Draw your feet in towards you as close as you can by grasping them around the toes from the bottom. Then bend forward while exhaling, keeping the thighs down as far as possible. Keep your elbows in front of your knees. Ideally your forehead should reach your toes and both your elbows and knees should touch the floor, but there is no need to force yourself into this position. This is just a goal, and straining or forcing a stretch only defeats the purpose.

"D" (Kidney and Bladder Meridians)

Sit with your legs stretched straight out. Keep your heels together. Don't worry if your toes stay together. Keep your knees straight and try to keep the back of your legs in contact with the floor. Bend your upper body forward and reach your arms out toward your toes. Invert your palms to face outward to the arches so that the thumbs are turned down toward your heels.

This stretch, very similar to the "toe touching exercise", is often used to check people's flexibility. In other methods this stretch is sometimes forced by jerking the head down with a bouncing movement or by having someone else push on the back from behind.

Bend forward as far as you can while exhaling in the position described above and then draw a deep breath.

When Ki starts filling up your body, you will feel tension from your waist down to your feet and your toes will be drawn backward. Let your head hang down over your knees with your arms stretched forward to their limit. This will cause strong lines of tension to form, beginning from your hands and running along your arms then down and back along your legs to your feet. This is the course of the Kidney and Bladder Meridians. Although these lines of tension cause your body to be less flexible, do not stretch them forcibly. If you use too much force, it can cause muscle cramps in your legs.

The line of tension will be relieved automatically as you exhale slowly and completely. You can feel how the arms, which would not stretch out any farther, ease forward slightly. Try to get a good feel for how this stretch is affected with relaxation, because this stretch of the Kidney and Bladder Meridians, in particular, is one where you'll get an extra stretch after releasing Ki. You will really be able to feel the difference after repeating this process two or three times.

"E" (Heart Constrictor and Triple Heater Meridians)

This posture is difficult for some people; avoid straining yourself. The ideal sitting posture for this stretch is the lotus position. In the lotus position, the legs are crossed and each foot is placed on the other thigh. The "half lotus", where only one foot is placed on the other thigh, is also fine for this stretch. It is also possible to do this stretch simply by sitting cross-legged without placing either foot on the other leg. The closer your knees are to the floor the better, but do not force them. It really does not matter if the knees are raised slightly off the floor, or if one knee sits higher than the other.

Next, cross your arms one over the other and grab the opposite knees. The arm on the same side as the leg on top should go over the top of the other arm. Check both sides and assume the easiest posture first. Next bend as far forward as possible and use your arms to pull yourself down so your forehead reaches down toward the floor. Rather than keeping your back straight, bend forward and let your head hang down. Just draw your body forward with the feeling of pulling it down toward your feet.

After exhaling completely and bending down as far as you can, draw in a deep breath. The lines of tension that form along your back and down the outside of your arms and legs as you inhale is the course of the Triple Heater Meridian. The lines of tension on the opposite side (the inside), is the Heart Constrictor Meridian. As you exhale again you should be able to feel these lines relax. Repeat this sequence three or four times.

"F" (Liver and Gallbladder Meridians)

Sit on the floor with both legs extended out to either side. Relax and spread your legs as far apart as you can. Keep your knees straight so that the backs of your legs stay on the floor. Your legs do not need to be spread apart any more than you are able to keep them fully extended with ease.

Next clasp your hands high over your head and turn your palms upward. Straighten your elbows and start leaning down to one side. Bend down toward one foot with your arm on the same side facing down. Keep facing forward as you bend down to one side. Instead of turning your torso to face the direction in which you are bending, face the front and bend down sideways. After bending down as far as you can during the exhalation, slowly inhale. You should feel lines of tension form along the outside of the leg you are leaning toward, down the

inside of the opposite leg, and along the side of your body that is fully extended, as well as along the front of your body toward the side which is down.

When you exhale completely, this tension will be relieved somewhat and the stretch will increase. As you draw another breath, the same lines of tension will form. You must not bend so far as to cause pain. If you become too preoccupied with bending, this will cause the backs of your legs to rise up off the floor, and the stretching effect on the meridians will be lost.

Check first to see which direction you can bend easier and begin on that side. After practicing this stretch over a period of time, the arm on the side you are bending toward will begin to reach your knee. Also you will be able to spread your legs wider and wider to more closely approach a straight line. Remember however, the purpose in these stretches is not to attain the flexibility of a gymnast or ballerina. The goal is to find the best position in which you can feel the resistance or a tingling sensation coming from the line of tension forming along the meridians.

Finishing

After completing the six basic meridian stretches in succession, relax for a while on your back with your eyes closed (posture "Z"). Do not spread your arms and legs too far out to the side. Become entirely detached from the external world. When you do this, your mind will begin to tune in to internal events of your body. You may begin feeling various sensations like tingling or buzzing along the course of meridians. You can regard this as energy flow. These sensations have their origins in the inner workings of your body, instead of issuing from conscious awareness. When you quiet your mind and relax completely, you can actually experience this primal awareness of being alive come welling up from within.

We must practice this exercises with a global idea of movement, like Traditional Karate movements, we need after some time of practice to dominate the form. Do not observe the external form of techniques, observe the global form. Look at the process, that's a fluid movement, in this process you can detect the fluency of Ki.

With this Meridians exercises we can also have one better attitude, increase our ki and also will collaborate in the posture and balance of the body.