

Four forms of exercise that honor the body and quiet the mind, plus tips to turn any physical activity into a movement-based meditation.



meditation
in motion

Spirituality & Health

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Move your body, still your mind

By Kathryn Drury Wagner



WHEN YOU CONSIDER a practice of meditation, you probably envision yourself with eyes closed, sitting cross-legged and immobile. Yet many spiritual exercises use postures and movement as paths to contemplation. “It’s multitasking, but in the best way,” says tai chi expert Bill Douglas. Try one of these tools to create your own natural rhythm.

WALK A LABYRINTH

Walking a labyrinth is different from negotiating a maze: The only puzzles you’ll encounter are your own internal ones. “It’s not walking in circles; it’s a very specific and structured pattern. It’s a complex spiral, always clockwise to the center,” says Rev. Lauren Artress of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, the author of *Walking a Sacred Path: Rediscovering the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Practice*. “There’s no right way or wrong way to tailor the walk.”

When stepping into a labyrinth, Artress says, “the mind quiets and the inner symbolic path opens up to you.” Her suggestion: “Walk in, release, and come home to yourself. When you are in the center, you receive; stay as long as you want. Return in the opposite way.” Find a labyrinth near you at labyrinthlocator.com.

REVITALIZE WITH QIGONG

“Qigong is a 5,000-year-old Chinese health and longevity exercise that synchronizes the breath with the mind’s intention and graceful, flowing movements,” says Daisy Lee, a certified advanced qigong instructor. “Qigong’s focus is on self-healing and activating the subtle and smooth flow of energy throughout the body.” A regular practice can lower your blood pressure and boost your immunity, flexibility, and circulation.

For calm and balance, Lee suggests the showering qi movement:

1 Relax your body, imagining that your feet are sinking deep into the earth. Your hands are in front of your lower belly, palms facing each other, forming an imaginary ball of energy.

2 *Inhale*. Open your arms to the sides as if to expand the ball, while raising your arms to shoulder height.

3 At shoulder level, turn the thumbs back and the palms up and *exhale*, releasing any tension from your body as you drop and relax your shoulders, elbows, and hands.

4 *Inhale*, as you raise your arms up over your head.

5 Palms facing down, deeply *exhale* as you lower them, “showering” the body with cleansing, revitalizing energy. Repeat three times.





PRACTICE PEACE WITH AIKIDO

The circular, flowing movements of the Japanese martial art aikido are meant to do as little harm to an opponent as possible, while still providing self-defense. “All the techniques are based on being able to receive the energy and lead it to something less dangerous,” says sensei Rick Butler, who has been practicing and teaching aikido since 1979.

When instructing his students, he focuses on breathing. “Relax your mind and body so they are fluid. There, you’ve added longevity. The stress and chaos within you, that’s a killer. You are rarely in a physical fight, but you are in a mental fight almost every day. Aikido is about mastering *you*.” If you want to try it, Butler suggests attending a beginner’s class at a local dojo and wearing sweats. “It’s ‘come as you are’ because you learn to work within your limitations and then to change your limitations.”



RIDE THE WAVE WITH TAI CHI

You've probably seen people practicing tai chi in a park, but, says Bill Douglas, "That's like you're looking at the surface of the sea. Beneath is a huge ocean of inner awareness. Tai chi is an exploration of consciousness and the workings of the body." Douglas has studied tai chi for 30 years and created the DVD *Anthology of Tai Chi & Qigong*.

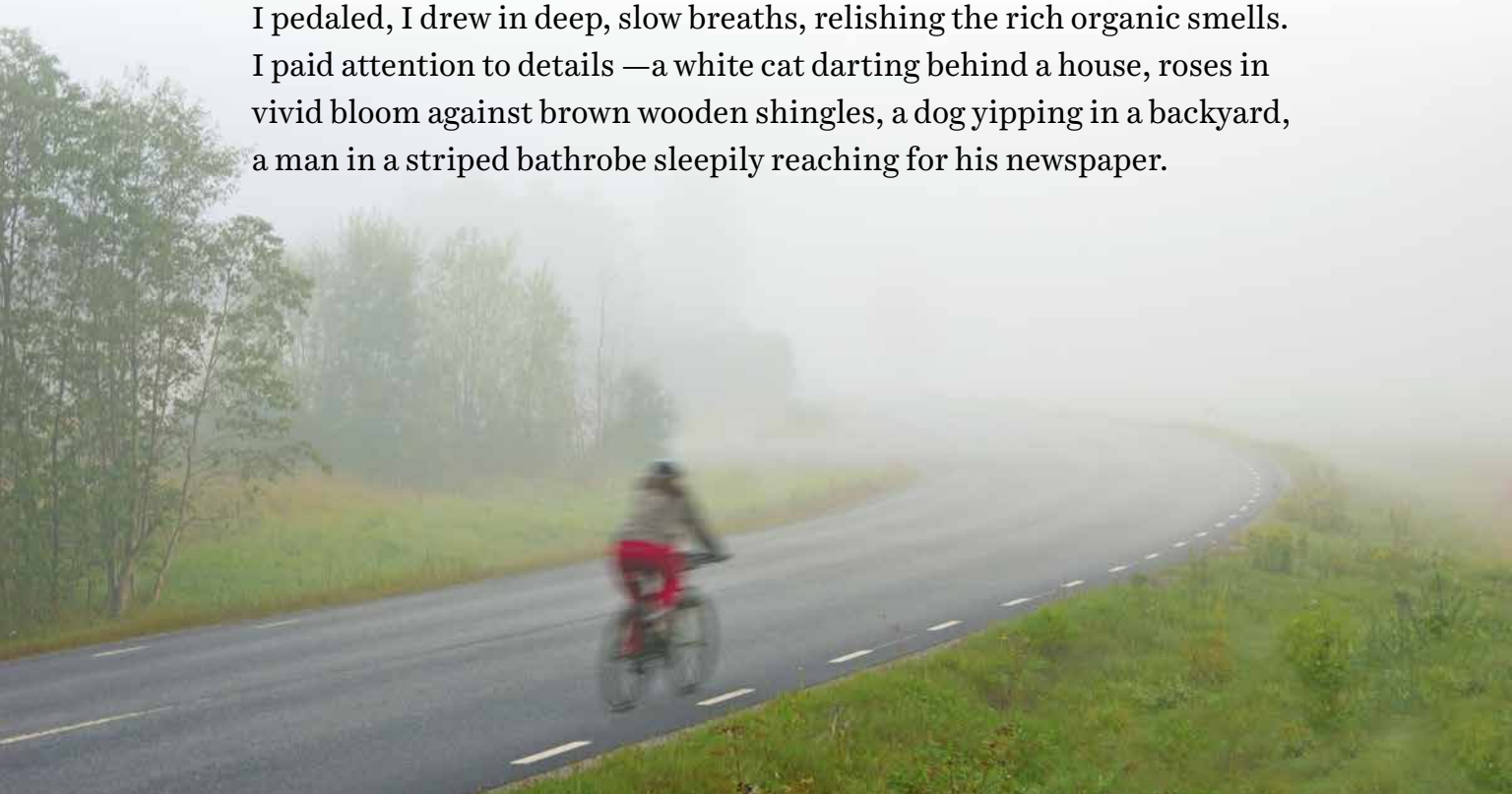
Like qigong, tai chi is low-impact and accessible to nearly anyone, even people dealing with health issues. Flowing through the movements and visualizations, you become aware of where your body is holding on to stress, "untangling the physical energy and mental knots," says Douglas. "You're sinking from one leg onto another leg, breathing and relaxing; it's a metaphor for going through the changes of life. But you're constantly in the here and now."

To get started, Douglas suggests, "A live class is optimum. Books fill in the intellectual parts, and DVDs are good for learning the physical motions." Check with your local community or recreation center for beginners' classes. ◀

The joy of spirit in exercise

By Barbara Bartocci

ON DARK WINTER MORNINGS, for years, I have wrapped myself in a quilt and sat in the stillness for 30 minutes, meditating. But one summer Tuesday, instead of sitting in my prayer room, I rose at 5:30 and got on my bike. The sky was an iridescent mother-of-pearl hue, and the Midwest heat was still at bay. I headed for the country beyond our housebound suburbs, and as I pedaled, I drew in deep, slow breaths, relishing the rich organic smells. I paid attention to details — a white cat darting behind a house, roses in vivid bloom against brown wooden shingles, a dog yipping in a backyard, a man in a striped bathrobe sleepily reaching for his newspaper.



My wheels circled in rhythm with my breath, and as I pedaled, I realized I was praying, as if my wheels were prayer beads. It seemed natural—effortless—to recite my mantra with each turn as my tires whirred against the asphalt. The prayerful repetition brought a deep sense of oneness with my environment, of harmony with the world around me, that stayed with me all day. I still love social rides with my bicycle buddies. But now, in cycling season, I also get up early two or three times a week and ride alone.

I've thought about how a favorite fitness activity can turn into meditation in motion. When people ask me how it happens, I suggest these six steps.

Create intention. Spiritual masters point out that whatever we focus on will command our energy, so any activity that is done with right intent will engage our best energy. Consciously choose to let exercise be your path to spiritual energy.

As you begin your workout, it may help to say an affirmation. Here are two that I like: "I am exercising my mind, body, and spirit today," or, "I invite God (or my Higher Power) to be with me as I exercise my body." Then, simply pay attention to the natural rhythm and flow of what you're doing.

When Imogene Thiesen of Kansas City hiked the Appalachian Trail six years ago, she intended to walk mindfully. By acknowledging her purpose each morning, she found herself noticing each lift of the foot, each bend of the knee, the way her hands swung loosely at her sides. She became aware of nature's small details:



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a tucked-away wildflower, a scurrying squirrel, the rustle of insects. Her wilderness walk became a meditation.

Carol Sicilano, who taught health and physical education at the University of Dayton, describes the moment before a figure skater performs. “You see the skater come onto the ice. He’s jittery. He skates around the arena once and then heads for the center. Then he strikes a pose and suddenly there is a stillness, a focus.”

It’s in that moment of stillness that you create your intention.

Breathe deeply. “Many people do not breathe properly,” says Pam Grout, author of *Jumpstart Your Metabolism* (Simon & Schuster/Fireside Books), a book on breathing techniques. Before exercising, breathe deeply and consciously several times. Feel the air moving into and lifting your body. Imagine that the

soles of your feet are receiving energy from the earth, and picture, with each inhalation, that you are drawing in the earth’s warm energy. Pull your breath smoothly up through your torso. As you exhale, picture yourself releasing toxins of anxiety, fear, and impatience.

Stay focused. “There’s a connection between the intense focus of mind required by spiritual practice and the quality of mind athletes attain when they’re in the zone,” writes Andrew Cooper in *Playing in the Zone* (Shambhala Press).

If you let your mind run free, it’s easy to get caught up in a negative thought process some experts call “chaining.” First you worry about your boss’s critique of a report you prepared. Then you jump to the rumor that your company is downsizing. Uh-oh. What if your boss is unhappy with your work and lets you go? In minutes,

you're picturing yourself homeless and on the street. All this while you're jogging down a trail near your house.

The hard part of staying focused is knowing when your thoughts are rambling. Once you do, say to yourself, "Stop," and gently bring awareness back to what you're doing, whether it's lifting a tennis racket, taking a walk, or paddling a canoe.

Repeat a power word.

It helps you stay focused if you concentrate on a word for a positive quality you want to encourage in yourself. One week it might be "compassion," another week "love," another week "forgiveness." Silently say your word in rhythm with your exercise.

"Repetition is one of the most powerful methods of creating continuous prayer," writes Thomas Powers in *Invitation to a Great Experiment* (East Ridge Press). "All you have to do is repeat the name of God. Any beginner can use this method and get real results."

Last summer, I watched a kayaker beach her bright yellow boat on the shore of Lake Michigan. We started talking, and though I never did ask her name, she told me she had been a workaholic until she was diagnosed with cancer. When she went into treatment, she began taking time to hike, camp, and kayak.

"Part of my healing process has been to recognize that I'm not running the show," she said. "In my kayak, I sit low and close to the water, and when I lift my paddle, I feel that I'm part of the boat, the water, the sky, the whole mystery of creation. So as I paddle, I give thanks. I'm so grateful to be alive and part of it all."

"Paddle prayer," I said.

She smiled. "That's a good name for it."



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Listen to your body.

Sometimes we're stressed without knowing why, which interferes with spiritual connections. Pay attention to the clues your body gives you. As she volleyed a tennis ball, Helen Lemmon of Overland Park, Kansas, noticed that she was hitting it really hard. She asked herself why and realized that she was angry about a situation at work. By noticing her physical actions, she got in touch with her mental agitation. Then she used exercise to discharge her

feelings, and afterward, returned to her higher intent.

Take inventory of your body by asking, "What's happening in my gut? Is my stomach tight or relaxed? What sensations are in my chest? What do I feel in my throat? Is my brain chattering?"

Several spiritual writers encourage the physical act of opening your hands. People clench their fists when they're holding onto something and are afraid to let go. Opening your hands in a slow, conscious way is an act of surrender that shows acceptance and willingness to face life as it is.

Extend yourself. Inner power is a state of being, a confidence that you can handle whatever comes in life. You get that power by reaching beyond your usual comfort zone. The first time I bicycled, I was winded after five miles. But every time I rode, the distance became easier. Now it feels like nothing to cycle 40 miles.

The benefits of sports and exercise carry over into other parts of our lives. After a talk I gave in Chicago, an attorney approached me and said, "thought you'd like

to know: I found the courage to start law school at age 42 after I learned to stand on my head in yoga class.”

In Colorado, Theresa Montano learned to ski, kayak, climb rocks, and skydive—after she lost her sight at age 17. Becoming proficient in sports helped her find the courage to adjust to her blindness. She graduated from college and began a successful career in computer science.

At the same time, don’t push yourself so hard it becomes counterproductive. “God meets us where we are,” writes Quaker author Richard Foster in *Celebration of Discipline*. “Occasional joggers do not suddenly enter an Olympic marathon. They prepare and train over a period of time, and so should we.”

Mary Hockersmith, then a teacher in Massachusetts, learned to ski in the mountains of Vermont. On her last run of a ski vacation, she finally began skiing in the rhythm she had tried all week to achieve. She felt as if she were dancing down the mountain. “I’m doing it!” she realized. But as soon as she became aware of doing it, “I got self-conscious, and wham! I fell.”

Hockersmith’s skiing had become a natural meditation, an un-selfconscious flow—until she noticed. Then her ego snapped into place, she got nervous, and lost it. Eventually, as she kept practicing, the rhythm of skiing became second nature. Then, “I was in the dance,” she said.

These six steps can change fitness activities from recreation to personal re-creation. By connecting sweat to the sacred, exercise not only builds the body, calms the mind, and lowers stress—it also, as I learned on my bicycle, becomes a joyful meditation in motion. ◀



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If you're athletic, or if you'd like to try a physically active type of meditation, moving meditation practices such as yoga, tai chi, qi-gong, or sacred dance might make your spirit sing.

MOVING MEDITATION 101

What: Moving meditation allows you to turn any form of conscious movement into a sacred body prayer. Some people use the practice to express themselves and experience the present moment, while others set an intention to communicate or connect with nature or the divine.

Examples: Spiritually inspired martial arts such as tai chi and qigong; vinyasa and other types of meditative yoga; walking meditation; and dancing meditation.

Benefits: A variety of studies have been conducted on the benefits of moving meditation practices. For example, a study of healthy seniors in Shanghai suggested that tai chi increases brain size, boosts memory, and may delay dementia. Studies have also shown practicing yoga offers a number of benefits, including boosting immunity and sexual performance, easing migraines, and helping with insomnia.

Keywords: active, graceful, body-based

Try this: Sign up for a tai chi, qigong, or yoga class. Or if you already practice one of these art forms, simply set an intention to turn your next session into a moving meditation. Find a quiet space that's free from distractions, put on some inspiring music if you'd like, and focus on the pleasure and sensation of every movement in your sequence.



Try this sample qigong exercise with Robert Peng.



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