

# 4 - 7 - 8 Breathing Exercise

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Here's a brief and simple exercise that I teach to all my T'ai Chi students because of its remarkable benefits. This one comes from Dr. Andrew Weill, a Harvard-educated medical doctor who's a well-known advocate of complementary and alternative medicine. He says this is the most effective anti-anxiety exercise he knows and he teaches it to almost all his patients. Some students tell me it slows their heart rate; others say it helps them get to sleep or restores their equanimity when they're anxious or stressed. It can be profoundly calming anytime and is an excellent prelude to meditation.

You can do this exercise standing, sitting, or lying down. In any position, make sure the spine is straight, right up through the back of the neck. If you're sitting, place the feet flat on the floor in front of you and let your hands rest on your thighs. If you're standing or lying down, let your arms rest at your sides.

There are three phases to this exercise, and I've found that giving focused attention to each one increases the effectiveness. First is a period of introduction. Get comfortable with a straight back. Place the tip of the tongue on the roof of the mouth, just behind the teeth (in the "Yogic" position) and hold it there. Make your breath slower, deeper, quieter, and more regular. This could last for several breaths or several minutes and gradually brings a very noticeable change to your inner state. Already you feel more relaxed and centered.

Next is the 4-7-8 exercise. Keep the tip of the tongue on the roof of the mouth—whether you're breathing in, holding your breath, or breathing out. Holding your tongue here while breathing out can take some getting used to. It helps to purse the lips so you can blow the air out around the tongue. You will inhale through the nose quietly (with a closed mouth) and exhale through the mouth noisily (with the mouth open).

Dr. Weill doesn't mention this, but I use belly breathing. I inhale by expanding the abdomen first, then filling the lungs. I exhale by contracting the abdomen, then deflating the lungs. When the abdomen expands, the diaphragm drops, giving the lungs more space to expand into. Thus I can take a deeper breath.

Begin the exercise by exhaling completely through the mouth. Then breathe in through the nose for a count of four. Hold the breath for a count of

seven. (It feels as if you have filled yourself up to the level of the collar bone.) Breathe out through the mouth gradually for a count of eight. Do this for four breath cycles.

Finally, the third phase: Spend some time breathing normally and noticing how you feel. Scan your body, acknowledging everything it's saying to you—good and bad—without trying to change or deny anything. I feel this prolongs the state of stillness and gives me a chance to tune into my body on a very subtle level.

Count at a rate that's comfortable for you. The actual time each breath cycle takes is not important—it's the 4-7-8 ratio that's important. Notice that exhalation is twice as long as inhalation. We have many more intercostal (inter-rib) muscles that control exhalation than we have that control inhalation, so breathing out more slowly than we breathe in is natural.

Feel lightheaded? Breathe more gently and shallowly. Adjust your rate of counting. The lightheadedness will go away with practice. You'll also find your lung capacity increasing.

Do this exercise a minimum of twice a day for a month. Then increase the breath cycles to eight and continue to do it at least twice a day. Doing it more than twice a day is fine, but don't go beyond eight breath cycles. Each practice is cumulative. The exercise gains impact over time.

How to account for the striking effectiveness of this exercise? There are various ways of working with qi in the body. When we do T'ai Chi, we move continuously and try to keep the qi flowing without obstruction. But in other qigong exercises, we deliberately stop the flow of qi temporarily. Wen Mei Yu, a Chinese T'ai Chi master teaching in this country, describes it this way: There's a hose on the ground with water running through it. I put a foot on the hose and stop the flow. Pressure builds up on one side. When I remove my foot, the water gushes through and cleans out the hose. In this way qi cleans out its meridians or pathways and massages them with a peristaltic action. It seems to me that this is what we're doing when we breathe in deeply, hold our breath, and then exhale slowly and fully.

According to neuropsychologist Rick Hanson, PhD, "When you elongate your exhalations, you spark your parasympathetic nervous system, which slows down your heart rate." (The parasympathetic nervous system is engaged when we feel calm, secure, and peaceful; the sympathetic is engaged when we're in a state of fight-or-flight alarm.)

Holding the breath also sparks the parasympathetic nervous system by stimulating the vagus nerve, which runs from the brain stem to the intestines, and is the longest nerve in the parasympathetic system.

We live in a world with too much yang (friction, heat, activity), and not enough yin (smoothness, coolness, stillness). I have the sense that this exercise replenishes yin by bringing in new qi with the inhalation, and vents excess yang with the exaggerated exhalation. It helps bring up the level of yin and draw down the level of yang so that they match each other and are in balance. The 4-7-8 exercise restores our inner equilibrium.