

Prayer Wheel

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Prayer wheel is a qigong exercise that, while it is not T'ai Chi, combines some of its most basic elements—breath, movement, and imagination. All the parts of oneself work in concert. This is one of the most effective calming exercises I know and I teach it to all my T'ai Chi students. Many people tell me they use it before going to bed, and it helps them sleep. Because (like T'ai Chi) it's calming and stimulating at the same time, you can use it whenever you want to slow down, relax, get centered, and refresh yourself.

Stand with one foot in front of the other, the front foot facing directly ahead, the back foot angled out at 45 degrees. Make sure there's a shoulder-width space between your feet from side to side so you have a good base, enhancing your balance. (This most basic martial arts position is called "bow stance.") Rock forward, letting the heel come up in back. Rock back, letting the toes come up in front. You're like the runners on a rocking chair. Rocking promotes the production of serotonin in the brain. It's a neurotransmitter that eases tension.

Hold the hands ten or twelve inches apart, palms facing each other. Begin with the hands in front of and close to the abdomen. As you rock forward, the hands circle up and away from you. As you rock back, the hands come in close to you at about chin height and move down toward the abdomen. The hands move in a continuous loop, in coordination with the rocking. Reverse the circle and spend an equal time practicing that way too.

Synchronize the breath with the circling hands and rocking weight. As the hands move away from you, breathe out. As the hands come in toward you, breathe in. Make your breathing slow, deep, and regular. It will determine the pace of the movement.

Finally, bring in your imagination. See yourself moving a circular wave of energy. It may be seen as white light or white water—or it could be some other color or no color at all. The half of the wave that's away from you is always attracting new energy from the universe. The other half pulls that energy right through your body—cleansing, renewing, and harmonizing. When I'm starting at the abdomen and circling in and up along my body, I'm inhaling earth energy. When I'm starting at my abdomen and circling away from myself, I'm inhaling sky energy.

Change which foot is in front and the direction of the circle whenever you like. This exercise can also be done sitting down. Just be sure to maintain a straight back from the tailbone through the back of the neck.