

creating a
Daily Practice

People frequently want to know when and how long to practice something, like meditation, in order to obtain the benefits. My recurring advice: Five minutes per day – everyday. It's not always the length of time we practice, but the accumulated benefits of practicing daily. This topic usually arises in the context of how we can take better care of ourselves. It seems to be an ongoing challenge for most of us to:

- 1) find something healthy that we enjoy doing and
- 2) be consistent at doing it.

The combined value of these two aspects brings us many benefits: less stress, irritability, tension; more circulation, energy, enjoyment.



Over the years I have studied many different subjects ranging from yoga to tai chi to meditation to chi kung to bodywork. Without fail the books and teachers recommend (or demand) a daily one-hour practice. I recall very vividly how I would be so enthusiastic and determined at the beginning of each new subject. After a weekend workshop I would return home and plan a practice schedule. The first few days were easy - an hour each day. Then, invariably, sometime in the next few days I began to slip; maybe only 35 - 45 minutes one day, then 15 minutes another day. And slowly, usually unconsciously, the inner guilt began growing because I was not meeting the external and internal expectations. Usually within one or two weeks I had stopped practicing altogether from the combined effects of not enough time and the guilt at not being successful.

Another variation on this theme is to only practice when attending a class. This may (or may not) work with a general cardiovascular style workout; hence the classic one hour three times a week routine. However, my experience has shown much greater chi (energy) benefit from that same three hours divided somewhat evenly across each day of the week. Hence, my oft-repeated encouragement: Begin with five minutes a day - everyday. Then let that time naturally increase based on your experience. The benefits seem to accumulate over time. The consistency seems to encourage a slow gradual accumulation which 'sticks' better than less frequent practice.



Looking back I am not quite sure how I stumbled into this approach. I remember repeating the cycle of beginning with one hour a day practices only to be unable to maintain them. One day I was inspired to make a commitment to hatha yoga. I decided to set my alarm clock five minutes earlier than my usual wake up time. I'd get out of bed, do my five minutes of yoga and continue with my morning routine. (The key to this method is to ACTUALLY get up when the alarm goes off!) After a few days I noticed something unusual. I wasn't feeling a repeat of the usual cycle. Five minutes was a do-able amount of time. I felt better having done the exercise. And, I felt better being consistent. The previous downward spiral, which eventually led to no practice, wasn't even getting started.

I stayed with that five minutes/day routine for awhile until I very naturally and spontaneously realized that I liked the results so much I wanted to expand to 10 minutes a day and set the alarm accordingly. Several weeks later I wanted to expand to 15 minutes a day. At the peak of that yoga phase I found myself enthusiastically AND consistently, getting up two hours before my

normal morning routine to practice.

Since that time my daily practice has naturally evolved in many ways. What hasn't changed is the consistency of doing something each day. And through experience I learned that it wasn't how long I practiced, but that I did something each day. This has been a valuable lesson that I now regularly apply to all kinds of exercises and practices that I enjoy.

You may already know an exercise or practice that you can experiment with. If not, try the following Tao Yin exercise. It is simple, easy and fun.



Baby Laughing & Playing

from Mantak Chia, *Tao Yin: Exercises for Revitalization, Health and Longevity*

We often see infants joyfully laughing while rolling on their backs, legs and arms shaking loose and free. This uninhibited and spontaneous movement seems to activate the lymph system, endorphins, and blood oxygenation. Together this seems to improve cardiac, respiratory and immune functions. Another way to say it is: it moves chi. Besides, it's fun.

1) Lie on your back, raise your legs and arms into the air and shake them like a loose rag doll. You can start by breathing deeply and allow any spontaneous tension releasing sounds to occur. Feel the abdomen activate with the combination of breathing and moving.

2) Next, add laughing. Experiment with all varieties of laughing: little to big, chuckles to belly laughs. Go back and forth. Allow the laughing to happen in whatever form it feels like. Be playful.

3) Try this for a few minutes and then rest, focusing on breathing into the abdomen. Pay attention to the sensations in your body. Repeat as many times as you like.

I find that five minutes of playing and laughing like a baby in the morning allows my natural laugh to bubble forth more easily during the rest of the day.