

Guidelines for Leading Retreat Exercises and Mindful Movement in Retreat

Safety Instructions.

Leaders of exercises need to be aware of the following:

Clearly communicate to retreatants at the start of the retreat that in all movement, people are asked to take responsibility for their own limitations, any ailments or injuries. This can be included during notes on safety on the first evening and repeated before the first movement/exercise session on day one. If necessary, a reminder can be offered after that.

“ If anyone has any injury or is experiencing aches or pain, then listen to your body and allow your body’s needs to override any instruction from the leader/my instructions. Please be mindful of your own body and it’s limitations, whilst allowing yourself to work with your edges is a skilful way”

The option to do a movement sitting down – i.e with arms only – or an alternative movement, can be offered where appropriate.

If participants wish to do their own stretches, yoga and so forth during breaks, they are free to do so. They take responsibility for undertaking their own exercises – i.e at their own risk.

Meditative Instructions

Leaders can be mindful of the distinction between a more instructive and a more invitational approach. ‘ Now raise the arms ... ’ carries a different message from ‘ raising the arms ... ’ Using the present participle carries a more participatory feeling than a giving didactic instruction. In the context of silent retreat, verbal instruction may not apply, however the difference is worth being aware of. “ As best you can ...”, “ if it’s comfortable for you ... ”

Skilful use of words can make a difference, however, generally, movements can be communicated non-verbally.

‘ Working with edges ’ means being aware. Being aware of limitations and finding a middle way – i.e:

- exploring moving with edges in terms of stretching, experiencing strong sensation, working particular muscles, opening up the body.
- exploring being with edges in terms of acceptance, compassion and wisdom – not to push, not to induce or ignore pain, or fall for ‘macho’ approach.

The term ‘ strong sensation ’ can carry a more open meaning than the term ‘ pain. ’ This applies particularly in sitting meditation, however also in movement. The word ‘pain’ can sometime belong to the ‘2nd arrow’ (Samyutta-nikaya, xxxvi.6, the Sallatha Sutta – “ The Buddhists say that two arrows always fly towards you. Whether they hit or not is another matter. The first arrow is the bad thing that happens to you. The second arrow... You know what it is. It is what you do to yourself after the bad thing that happens to you ”).

Guidelines for Leading Retreat Exercises and Mindful Movement in Retreat

Equally, strong sensation can indeed be pain: i.e – the signal from our body that we need to stop/change what we're doing; change position or move differently in some way.

Exercises may be experienced as more vigorous and undertaken with the purpose of 'raising energy'. Exercises in the yard in the morning or when energy appears to be dipping, may emphasize a warm-up approach, supporting circulation through stretch and speed.

Chi Kung works with subtle energy – 'Chi/Prana' and may need the basis of a more physical warm-up to stretch muscles, improve circulation and flexibility generally.

Or movement may be offered more in the mode of mindful movement – as at DDM – where a slower tempo and a softer quality, support a more unified 'moving without a goal.'

Qualities of non-striving, effortless effort – 'wu wei' – & beginner's mind may be embodied here.

Vizualisation can be a support for directing energy along with the use of the breath around the body.

'Where is the mind?' 'Mind is in the movement.' Not separate.

Technical Points

Some technical points can to be borne in mind.

In standing exercises, the knees may be invited to 'soften' – i.e. – to bend slightly, rather than be locked – i.e be off-lock.

Standing with feet parallel to one another, about a hip- or shoulder-width apart will bring support from the ground through a stable, open stance.

The body needs to maintain connexion to the 'tan-tien' or belly centre/hara. The tan tien is the centre of the physical body from which all movement is co-ordinated – 'flows.'

Moving from the waist – moving from the centre: In warming up, turning the body with arms loose and swinging round the waist, encouraging movement from the belly, rather than from the shoulders. Relaxed shoulders, 'open' joints: elbows, wrists, pelvis, knees, ankles; legs strong, rooted – relaxed through feet, soles open, so energy flows, weight is released to the Earth.

In standing or moving, where the knee bends, the knee should not bend further than above the toes, i.e not beyond the foot. The knee rests above the foot, edge of knee and edge of toes vertically in line. A movement leading from the head will show through the knee leaning the body too far, causing the body to become top-heavy,

Guidelines for Leading Retreat Exercises and Mindful Movement in Retreat

losing connection to the tan tien – possibly loss of balance; there could be a risk of strain or injury to the knee.

Neck rolls are discouraged by some – if you are going to share this exercise, use gentleness. Invite people to rest head to left, drop chin forward toward earth, then rest to right and then lift chin to sky, in a slow, circular movement; then change direction.

Shoulder stands: Contra-indicated for non-qualified instructors to lead. Unless you are a qualified yoga teacher or equivalent with experience of teaching this, do not teach this exercise on retreat.

For the benefits of inversion to be had, an alternative is to invite people to move to wall, bring bottom toward the wall and use the wall as a support for legs, resting heels against the wall at an angle, 90 degrees or less according to how the body feels comfortable.

Eyes are best co-ordinated with the tan tien/belly button – i.e facing in same direction. If they're not, connexion to the centre is lost; movement is being lead from the head/shoulders. Just worth noticing/looking out for, in self/in participants.

WCF STANDING EXERCISE SET

The standing set is one practised at Dharma Drum. Generally, WCF have practised the exercises in quite a vigorous manner but at the Leaders' retreat in 2011 (?), Venerable Jinho Fashi demonstrated how they are performed as an "internal" Qigong set.

Qigong may be translated as "energy cultivation" or "energy work". The term came into common usage in China from the 1950s when, it seems, the Chinese government took several older traditions, stripped them of any cultural, spiritual, magical and martial connotations and re-crafted them as sets of exercises aimed at reinvigorating the health of the masses.

Today, the term Qigong encompasses a vast array of styles, forms and exercises which are broadly divided into external and internal forms – Wai gong and Nei gong. Shaolin martial arts (commonly known as Kungfu) are predominantly external or hard forms. Taijiquan (commonly known as Tai Chi) is an internal or soft form.

One of the older traditions borrowed from was referred to as Daoyin which may be translated as "leading, guiding or directing energy". "Healing exercises" is an expression that is also used. Yin originally meant "to draw a bow" and may be taken to mean exercising muscles and limbs and releasing joints with the purpose of nourishing life. It is a different word to the "yin" in yin-yang.

The first traces of Daoyin stem from the Zhou dynasty (1045 – 256 BCE) and indicate the importance of moving limbs and joints in a slow, gentle manner in conjunction with mindful deep breathing and the conscious guiding of qi, which would nowadays be referred to as "internal" Qigong.

Guidelines for Leading Retreat Exercises and Mindful Movement in Retreat

Qigong is generally divided into a number of categories:

General health and wellbeing; medical; martial; spiritual – Daoist, Buddhist and Confucian.

No matter where exercises come from or how we may categorise them, they should be appropriate to one's needs. In the retreat situation the purpose of exercise, for most of us, is to relieve stiff and sore muscles and to ease tension in both body and mind. But it is not different from meditation and should be practised with the same attitude as Kinhin, so that seated meditation, walking meditation and exercise meditation complement and bolster each other.

Even when one is very familiar with exercises, they should not be launched into or practised vigorously until the body has been properly warmed up. In this case, the standing exercises that we practise are best seen as a set of mindful warm ups. Rising from sitting meditation and going more-or-less straight into vigorous deep bends and stretches is inadvisable, the more so as many people will not be very familiar with them.

It is good practice to point out that such exercises are not compulsory. People should be asked to be aware of their own abilities and limitations e.g. high or low blood pressure, problems with backs or knees and so on. Such difficulties need not necessarily preclude people from doing the exercises but they should work within their own limitations. Someone with lower back problems should, for instance, bend their knees when bending forwards and not try to go too low.

Exercises practised as qigong seek to harmonise body, breath and mind – Chinese people refer to these as the Three Adjustments. Before starting it is common practice to stand and scan through the body, noting any aches, pains and stiffness. Also, parts that feel more positive and areas that are simply neutral. Then, note the breathing and finally the state of the mind e.g. calm, nervous, lethargic, excited etc. Following this, the exercises are performed gently and smoothly with a sense of elasticity so that stretches are progressive and joints are never locked out i.e. hyper-extended. The Chinese refer to "silk reeling" to give the feel of how they should be performed, implying a constant, gentle, purposeful, flowing speed with no sudden movements that might break the silk being drawn and so wasting the cocoon.

The process should never be rushed. To stand and scan followed by three rounds of each exercise and then standing and scanning once more at the end requires about 10–15 minutes.

SUMMARY OF POINTS TO BEAR IN MIND

Stand quietly for a minute or two, scanning the body, breath and state of mind before beginning.

Start and finish each round of each exercise in gassho.

Move seamlessly, neither underplaying nor overdoing each exercise.

Guidelines for Leading Retreat Exercises and Mindful Movement in Retreat

Allow each stretching movement to be a progressive, gentle, elastic movement and ensure that joints are never locked nor movements forced.

When stepping forwards do not push the knee in front of the toes.

When bending forwards from the waist, bend the knees a little to help ease pressure on the back.

When bending backwards, keep the movement small and try to feel that you are gently stretching the front of body and try to avoid compacting the spinal vertebrae in the small of the back. Squeezing the buttocks reduces stress in the lower back.

Allow the breathing to be natural, never forced, and seek to find a personal coordinated rhythm of mindful movement and breath.

At the end of each exercise, stand for a few moments and notice the various sensations.

At the end of the full set, stand quietly for a minute or two, scanning the body, breath and state of mind, noticing and appreciating any differences or changes from the scan carried out at the beginning.