

Learning How to Move All Over Again

Part of the confusion about stretching is the word itself. “Stretching” conveys the idea of grasping the ends of a rope or a rubber band and pulling it taut. If you do this to a muscle, you can actually cause the muscle to contract rather than stretch or, worse yet, tear muscle fibers... Often there is little or no improvement in general flexibility, and not infrequently microscopic tears are created in the muscles, causing them to contract... Like the athletes of today, martial arts practitioners in ancient times recognized the need for exercises that improve and maintain flexibility. By observing natural phenomena, they made simple but profound observations. One of these observations was that movement kept the body's functions from stagnating. There is a famous saying in China that expresses this concept: “The hinge of the door that is opened and closed every day will never rust.” Exercises were developed by observing and imitating animals that were admired for their ease of movement.

Like many people who like cats, I have always been fascinated by the way cats move. They appear to be lazy and sleep a lot, yet they are agile, flexible & strong. Cats don't do stretching exercise or engage in weight training, yet they move with a supple, relaxed grace that few humans can match. Suppleness is in many ways a more useful term than flexibility or stretching. The word supple conjures up an image of a body that is like a piece of pliable cloth or leather, able to bend or move in any direction without kinking or binding. What the Chinese saw in the cat's movement was that cats subtly and efficiently exercise their whole body even in their simplest movements. They are supple not because they do stretching exercises, but because they relax the muscles that are necessary to perform a particular movement. Relaxing these ‘antagonistic’ muscles not only allows a joint or a limb greater freedom of movement, it also creates more efficient movement that conserves the body's energy. (*The **agonist** is the muscles directly engaged in the contraction, as distinguished from the antagonistic muscles, which have to relax at the same time for the contraction to occur).

Mind & Movement

The natural movement of animals and the realization that flexibility could be increased by relaxing the antagonistic muscles, rather than stretching, were only part of what the Chinese observed. It was not only what the animals did externally that made them supple and pliable, but what they did internally. When the cat moves, it is fully involved in what it is doing. Cats do not exercise while thinking about something else or watch television while running on a treadmill. Martial arts masters express this fully engaged attentiveness as being ‘like a cat catching a rat.’ When a cat stalks a rat or a mouse, it crouches with the spirit of its whole being focused on the task at hand. Mental involvement in the movements being performed engaged the whole being in the exercise, producing far greater results than merely performing them by rote.



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Breathing & Flexibility

The last and perhaps most powerful and profound thing that the Chinese observed was that animals breathe when they move. This seems absurdly obvious, but go to the gym and see how many people forget to breathe while stretching or lifting a heavy weight.

The snake is the master breather of the animal world. In China, the snake is celebrated for its suppleness and pliability. A snake's very movement is such a seamless blend of contraction and relaxation that it appears to flow across the ground. When snakes breathe, they breathe with their whole body, indicating that the qi moves smoothly and unimpeded in every part of their body.

Deep, relaxed diaphragmatic breathing is like the breathing of the snake. With practice it can be felt in every part of the body. This kind of breathing actually helps relax tight muscles and can increase the range of motion in joints by allowing the qi and blood to flow freely. Besides aiding flexibility, breathing into the lower abdomen helps connect the strength of the lower limbs and back to the actions of the upper arms. This brings together the overall power of the human body into a single unified action...

Many people have forgotten how to breathe with their whole body. Rather than letting the diaphragm drop and the belly expand outward on inhalation, they breathe into their chest. This creates tension in the upper back, neck and shoulders... Try a simple experiment. Breathe shallowly in a panting movement for 30 seconds. Feel how tension begins to build in your upper body. Then try breathing naturally and deeply, letting the lower abdomen relax outward with the inhalation. Feel how the body relaxes and the neck and shoulder tension starts to let go.

The lessons of the animals – natural relaxed movement, mental attention, and breathing – gradually became codified into groups of exercises that could serve as a set of warm-up exercises and simultaneously teach the body to operate more efficiently. Martial arts teachers employ these exercise routines to develop flexibility and to reeducate the body's most basic movements so that they become connected, supple, and natural. In this regard, the exercises act as a kind of neuromuscular reprogramming of our most primal movements.

Text from Tom Bisio's [A Tooth from the Tiger's Mouth](#)

