

Why Hong-Sau Works

By Bharat Cornell, Director of Ananda's Meditation Support

A friend of mine was organizing a large religious festival in which hundreds of people would be involved. Days before, he wryly complained, "Even when I meditate, my mind is planning the event!" As meditators, we often find ourselves in the same predicament: fighting an over-active mind, with, seemingly, a life of its own. To meditate deeply, however, we need to quiet the mind. The more we do this, the more effective our meditations will be. It's only in perfect stillness that we experience the higher states of consciousness.

Swami Kriyananda wrote in *The New Path*, "Devotees, in their attempt to achieve inner communion with God, often find those efforts thwarted by restless thoughts. Yogis long ago discovered a technique for overcoming this obstacle. The breath, they said, is intimately related to the mental processes. A restless mind accompanies a restless breath. By simple, effective techniques for calming the breath, they learned how to free the mind for deeper divine communion."

As the breath flows, so flows the mind, yogis say, because there is a feedback system between the mind and the breath. As the breath becomes calmer, so does the mind, and vice versa. In the practice of Hong-Sau we concentrate on the breath, and as we do so, the quieter it becomes.

The breath is the greatest obstacle to deep meditation. As long as there is bodily tension, heart movement, and brain activity, the body needs oxygen to purify the blood, which causes us to breathe. Physical activity breaks down tissues in the body and causes decay. Running causes us to breathe more rapidly, while sleeping has less physical and mental activity, so we need less oxygen and our breathing slows down significantly.

The energy needed to keep the body functioning is like a magnet that draws us into matter consciousness and restlessness. Every night we experience the reverse of this principle when we sleep. Then our energy is withdrawn from the periphery of our body and into the spine. This is why sleep is so rejuvenating. Paramhansa Yogananda, however, called sleep "counterfeit samadhi (oneness)," because it is a subconscious act, as opposed to meditation, in which we use our conscious will. The direction of the flow of our inner energy determines our state of consciousness. Breathing techniques, like Hong-Sau, allow us to redirect this energy inward so we can experience a higher level of consciousness.

While many meditation methods ask you to concentrate on something outside of yourself, the beauty of the Hong-Sau technique is that you focus on something inside of you—the breath. Since our minds are naturally drawn toward movement, the breath also is a natural focal point for meditation.

When you begin practicing Hong-Sau, you may notice first the mechanics of your breathing, but as your breathing becomes calmer, you'll be more aware of the breath itself. When this happens, focus on the feeling of the air as it touches the inside of the nose. (If you consciously relax your nose, you will be able to feel the sensation of air more strongly.)

As the breath quiets, you will feel this sensation higher and higher in the nose until you feel it at the highest part of the nose, at the point between the eyebrows. (An important benefit of Hong-Sau is that it directs the mind to the spiritual eye, but it is important not to try to concentrate at the spiritual eye until you feel the sensation of air stimulating this point. Otherwise your concentration will be divided.) In time, your breath will gradually diminish, until finally, it is automatically and effortlessly suspended in breathlessness. Although this may seem incredible, when the body is totally still and no longer creating waste, there is no longer a need for the heart and breath to keep working.

The first time you notice your breath has slowed down, or even stopped altogether, it's natural to feel a little anxious. Don't be alarmed—these pauses can't possibly hurt you, as long as you let the breath flow naturally and don't try to hold it in or out of the lungs by force. When your body needs to breathe again, it will do so. As you practice Hong-Sau, it will help you to try consciously to enjoy the pauses between your breaths. Remember: the purpose of Hong-Sau is to increase the intervals between the breaths naturally, and eventually to free you from body-consciousness.