Exercise “A” (Lung and Large Intestine Meridians)

To stretch the Lung and Large Intestine Meridians, stand with your feet apart slightly more than shoulder width. The tips of your toes should point naturally outward. Put your hands behind your back with the palms facing backward, and hold them together by hooking your thumbs together. Spread your fingers out so that your fingers point as much as possible in opposite directions. Keep your knees straight and think of your weight as going mostly on the base of your little toes and bend forward as you exhale. Stretch both arms over yourself, keeping your elbows straight (Figs. 32–34). When your body is stretched forward as far as it will go, quietly begin to inhale. A line of tension or stiffness will be felt along the back of your legs, abdomen, back, and arms. In Exercise “A” the line which has a tingling sensation or a feeling of dis-tension corresponds to the Lung and Large Intestine Meridians. This sensation should not be felt as a result of using force to stretch these parts. As you inhale and your body becomes filled with Ki, what should happen is that you feel a line of tension develop along the course of the Lung and Large Intestine Meridians. This line of tension or stretch may be felt as being like a pulling sensation in the muscles. When you try to draw your arms forward by your own effort, the muscles become unneces-sarily tense and the real line of tension becomes indistinct and hard to feel. Imagine that your arms are being pulled forward by someone other than yourself. Compare your stance with that of the picture. If any strength is brought to bear on one part in particular, this will prevent you from feeling the meridian lines. It is important to hold the mental image of Ki energy flowing from the center point of your hara out to your arms and legs.

In conventional exercises the tendency is to force a stretch or to add a bounce in the movement to increase the range of movement. It is true that your limbs will increase in flexibility if you can endure the discomfort of stretching them forcibly, but improvement in flexibility achieved in this manner is just a product of repetition. You must realize that stretching by the use of force is the exact opposite of what is intended in these meridian exercises.

In Imagery Exercises you have to develop and savor the feeling of a good stretch, and you should never attempt to force a stretch. Each breath must be exhaled slowly and quietly after every inhalation to aid a smooth and relaxed stretch. Usually it is difficult to bring on relaxation in a stretched position just by thinking about loosening up. But if you imagine that Ki is being released (like air leaking out of a balloon) as you slowly exhale, you will be able to feel your whole body slowly relax. When you inhale, you should be able to feel the lines of the meridians expanding even more after having been relaxed completely. You will again feel tension develop along the same lines. Then exhale slowly again and feel the relaxation come with the outgoing breath. Repeat this breathing and relaxation about three times in the position of Exercise “A” and slowly return to the upright position.
Exercise "B" (Spleen and Stomach Meridians)

To stretch the Spleen and Stomach Meridians, first you must sit in the Seiza position* and then slowly lean backward (Figs. 35 and 36). As you lean down to the rear, move your feet apart, out from under your buttocks so that your buttocks come to rest on the floor. Since, for most people, the knees raise off the floor when laying all the way back like this, there is no need to force them down to the floor. Just keep your lower legs out to your side next to your hips so that you can keep your knees close together. After your back and shoulders are resting on the floor, stretch both arms over your head, interlace your fingers, and turn the palms toward your head (Figs. 37 and 38).

* Seiza is the traditional sitting posture in Japan where one sits erect with the legs folded under the hips. Sitting in Seiza is becoming less common in Japan with the progress of westernization, but it is still considered to be the most formal and ideal sitting posture.
38). Next breathe in and stretch your whole body so that it extends and straightens. This will naturally cause your back to raise up off the floor and your knees to spread apart; this is perfectly all right. The lines of tension that form down the front of your body and along the spine, as well as on both sides of the arms, correspond to the Spleen and Stomach Meridians.

If you let your knees spread far apart in this exercise, your back will reach the floor quite easily, but then the meridians will not be stretched fully. While your knees do not have to be kept together rigidly, you should try to keep them together as much as you can without undue effort. To make this easier, keep your feet out from under your buttocks and keep your back and hips against the floor. Once you get a good stretch all the way through your body, quietly breathe out as you relax your effort, and feel your whole body relax.

In other kinds of stretching exercises, parts which are not very flexible are often stretched forcibly. Even though this will stretch muscles and tendons, you will never feel the energy flowing through the whole body or learn to release Ki in the meridians and relax the lines of tension this way. It is actually very difficult to relax after forcing a stretch to the maximum limit.

The best way to release tension is to get a feel for what it is like to relax with Imagery Breathing, in which Ki is released with each exhalation. You must first develop a clear image of how Ki expands out from your hara and fills your whole body while doing Imagery Breathing in the reclined position. Ki should fill your lower abdomen and expand outward to your limbs as you inhale and then it should flow out as you exhale to leave you feeling completely relaxed. The tension in your body will go away naturally as you stretch slowly and gently with this mental picture. You can feel yourself loosen up as you do this.

The main point in Imagery Exercises is not to force a stretch, but to instead allow the stretch to happen a little bit at a time with each exhalation. Inhale after each complete exhalation while remaining in the fully stretched position reached as a result of having released Ki. As you inhale, you will once again feel an increase of tension in the same line of tension which relaxed slightly with the last exhalation. The same meridians as before fill up with Ki as you inhale and you can feel the tension build along the same lines. Remain in this position and feel the lines of tension after taking a deep breath, and then slowly let your breath out.

How much you are able to relax with each exhalation depends entirely on the depth and smoothness of your breathing. It is difficult to discern the subtle difference between tension and relaxation in the meridians when your breathing is strained or uneven. One of the most important things in Imagery Exercises is to relax your whole body and to experience your own breathing after finishing each exercise. Even though you may think that you have relaxed completely, often there is residual tension where you are unable to let go and relax your muscles completely. If it were true that our skeletal muscles contract by our conscious control only, we should be able to completely relax all of our muscles at will. In reality, however, a great deal of tension remains even after we try to relax. The basic aim of Imagery Exercises is to get a feel for that force within us which coordinates our muscles above and beyond our conscious control.
Exercise "C" (Heart and Small Intestine Meridians)

To stretch the Heart and Small Intestine Meridians sit on the floor and place the soles of your feet together in front of you by bending both knees out to the side. Draw your feet in toward yourself as close as you can by grasping them around the toes from the bottom (Fig. 39). Then bend forward while exhaling, keeping the thighs down as far as possible (Figs. 40 and 41). Ideally your forehead should reach your toes and both your elbows and knees should touch the floor, but there is no need to force yourself into this position. This is just a goal, and straining or forcing a stretch only defeats the purpose. This rule applies to all Imagery Exercises.

The movement of bending forward will naturally come to a stop at the place where your body is stretched to the limit. Pause here and breathe in to fill up with Ki, and your body will begin to tighten up from your hara out to your limbs. The lines of tension that form in this position are the Heart and Small Intestine Meridians. These exercises are designed to stretch specific meridians to the greatest extent possible so when you breathe in, you should be able to feel the full length of the meridians being stretched.

Fig. 39

Fig. 40

Fig. 41

Greater emphasis is placed on getting the form right in other methods of exercise, which are designed to increase circulation by working the muscles and joints. In calisthenics, one's attention naturally becomes focused on just those parts involved since all movements are made willfully. Imagery Exercises also require conscious control to get the body into each position. But once the position is reached, the object is to let go and do Imagery Breathing and just observe what goes on in your body. When breathing in, tension increases naturally and this tension is most pronounced along certain lines. At times this sensation extends from one end of the body to the other. It is most important that you experience the meridians in this way as something distinct from muscles and nerves.

You can feel for yourself how the line of tension begins to relax as you exhale. This is the sensation of relaxation accompanying the release of Ki. After each complete exhalation in the position of increased stretch, inhale and feel the tension build up once more along the same meridians. There is no need to be too concerned about reaching the ideal position. Just repeat this breathing and stretching routine several times in a row. The main requirement is to relax completely and reach the farthest point of the stretch at the end of each exhalation. No matter how much you try to relax and attempt to loosen up certain parts of your body, tension and stiffness will often remain in the neck and shoulders. When a person is told to relax his shoulders completely, chances are that he will become more tense in his shoulders because of having become more conscious of it. Autogenic training* is one way to learn how to relax intentionally through self-suggestion. By regular practice of Imagery Exercises, however, the ability to relax can be acquired automatically. As you continue practicing these exercises, each day your position will more closely resemble the desired form.
Exercise “D” (Kidney and Bladder Meridians)

To stretch the Kidney and Bladder Meridians, sit with your legs stretched straight out. While your heels must be kept together, there is no need to keep your toes together. Keep your knees straight and try to keep the back of your legs in contact with the floor as much as possible. Then bend your upper body forward and reach your arms out toward your toes (Figs. 42 and 43). Invert your palms to face outward to the arches so that the thumbs are turned down toward the heels.

This stretch of the Kidney and Bladder Meridians is very similar to the “toe touching exercise,” which is a good indicator of overall flexibility and is often used to check people’s flexibility. It is unwise, however, to simply regard flexibility as being tantamount to youthfulness without a real understanding of why flexibility is so important. Some people have trouble reaching their toes with their hands and the head remains far from the knees because their back is too rigid and the stretching action on the back of the legs is too uncomfortable. In other methods this stretch is some-

* Autogenic training is a therapeutic system of self-suggestion developed in the 1930s by Dr. J. H. Schultz of Germany. It is a self-training system involving the silent repetition of simple phrases aimed at regulating the autonomic nervous system and balancing physiological functions. Modified forms of autogenic training are widely applied today for stress related conditions.
times forced by jerking the head down with a bouncing movement or by having someone else push on the back from behind. There is no need whatsoever to endure pain to get a full stretch. Naturally it is better to be more flexible, but being flexible does not necessarily mean a person is healthy, and furthermore, it does not mean that the energy is flowing well along the meridians. Even flexible people, as limber as they may be, often have deep seated tension. When you force stiff muscles and joints to stretch, those particular muscles and joints become the focus of attention. Even though flexibility can be improved to some extent this way, it inclines a person to overlook the obstruction of Ki or the underlying dynamics which caused muscle tension and stiffness of joints in the first place. Stretching the lines of tension by slowly breathing and paying attention to the changes in the body as a whole is a much sounder way to work out tension and increase flexibility.

Bend forward as far as you can while exhaling in the position described above and then draw a deep breath. When Ki starts filling up your body, you will feel tension from your waist down to your feet and your toes will be drawn backward. Your head should hang down over your knees and your arms should be stretched forward to their limit. This will cause strong lines of tension to form, beginning from your hands and running along your arms then down and back along your legs to your feet. This is the course of the Kidney and Bladder Meridians. Although these lines of tension cause your body to be less flexible, it is not advisable to stretch them forcibly. When people try to do this stretch with too much force, it can cause muscle cramps in the legs.

The line of tension will be relieved automatically as you exhale slowly and completely. You can feel how the arms which would not stretch out any farther ease forward slightly. Try to get a good feel for how this stretch is effected with relaxation, because this stretch of the Kidney and Bladder Meridians, in particular, is one where the extra stretch after releasing Ki is quite apparent. This very same principle works in all other Imagery Exercises, and you will really be able to feel the difference after repeating this process two or three times.
Exercise "E" (Heart Constrictor and Triple Heater Meridians)

The posture of Exercise "E" for stretching the Heart Constrictor and Triple Heater Meridians is difficult for some people, so you must find the way that is the easiest for you to avoid straining yourself. The ideal sitting posture for this exercise is the lotus position of yoga and Zen meditation. In this position, the legs are crossed and each foot is placed on the other thigh. The "half lotus," where only one foot is placed on the other thigh, is also fine for this exercise. It is also possible to do this exercise simply by sitting cross-legged without placing either foot on the other leg. The closer your knees are to the floor the better, but do not force them. It really does not matter if the knees are raised slightly off the floor, or if one knee sits higher than the other.

Next cross your arms one over the other and grab the opposite knees (Fig. 44). The arm on the same side as the leg on top should go over the top of the other arm. For those who are right-handed it is generally better for the left arm to go over the right arm first, but it is best to assume the easiest posture first. Next bend as far forward as possible and use your arms to pull yourself down so your forehead reaches down toward the floor (Figs. 45 and 46). Rather than keeping your back straight, bend forward and let your head hang down. Just draw your body forward with the feeling of pulling it down toward the feet.

After exhaling completely and bending down as far as you can, draw in a deep breath. The lines of tension that form along your back and down the outside of your arms and legs as you inhale is the course of the Triple Heater Meridian. The lines of tension on the opposite side, to the inside, is the Heart Constrictor Meridian. As you exhale again you should be able to feel these lines relax. Repeating this sequence three or four times should give you an idea of what it means to relax and stretch.
Exercise "F" (Liver and Gallblader Meridians)

To stretch the Liver and Gallbladder Meridians you must sit on the floor with both legs extended out to either side. Relax and spread your legs as far apart as you can. Some people are able to spread their legs all the way to almost form a straight line with their legs, but for most people the legs form an obtuse angle. The important thing is to keep your knees straight so that the back of your legs stay on the floor. Your legs do not need to be spread apart any more than you are able to keep them fully extended with ease.

Next clasp your hands high over your head and turn your palms upward. Straighten your elbows and start leaning down to one side (Fig. 47). Bend down toward one foot with your arm on the same side facing down (Figs. 48 and 49). Keep facing forward as you bend down to one side. Instead of turning your torso to face the direction in which you are bending, face the front and bend down sideways. After bending
down as far as you can during the exhalation, slowly inhale. You should feel lines of tension form along the outside of the leg you are leaning toward, down the inside of the opposite leg, and along the side of your body that is fully extended, as well as along the front of your body toward the side which is down. These lines correspond to the Liver and Gallbladder Meridians. When you exhale completely, this tension will be relieved somewhat and the stretch will increase. As you draw another breath, the same lines of tension will form. You must not bend so far as to cause pain. If you become too preoccupied with bending, this will cause the backs of your legs to rise up off the floor, and the stretching effect on the meridians will be lost.

Sensing the line of tension form through the length of your body in this way is one way you can actually experience meridians for yourself. Releasing this tension with slow exhalations gives you a feel for achieving total relaxation. This relaxation does not occur when you begin by bending just as far as you can and attempt to relax after getting the maximum stretch. Instead of forcing a stretch, simply exhale until you are completely empty. When you reach this point, let go one last time and release all your Ki. This will automatically cause the line of tension to relax and your body will stretch a little bit farther. The relaxation and stretching effect tapers off after repeating this breathing and stretching sequence about three times. When this happens, slowly return to the starting position.

In the stretching of the Liver and Gallbladder Meridians, you should first check to see which direction you can bend easier and begin on that side. (Most people find it easier to bend to the right side.) After practicing this exercise over a period of time, the arm on the side you are bending toward will begin to reach your knee. Also you will be able to spread your legs wider and wider to more closely approach a straight line. The real purpose in these exercises, however, is not to attain the flexibility of a gymnast or ballerina. The most important goal is to find the best position in which you can feel the resistance or a tingling sensation coming from the line of tension forming along the meridians. The main objective here is to get a feeling for what it really is like to relax by releasing Ki and allowing tension to dissipate.

After completing the six basic meridian exercises in succession, just relax for a while on your back with your eyes closed (Exercise “Z”). Do not spread your arms and legs too far out to the side; just keep them comfortably apart. This position is called “the corpse” in yoga, which simply means to become entirely detached from the external world. When you do this, your mind will begin to tune in to internal events of your body. You may begin feeling various sensations like tingling or buzzing along the course of meridians which can be regarded as energy flow. These sensations, instead of issuing from conscious awareness, have their origins in the inner workings of your body. When you quiet your mind and relax completely, you can actually experience this primal awareness of being alive come welling up from within.