

Qigong: Mind Body Connection

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### Abstract

This paper explores qigong, its history of practice, and its current effect on health and wellness. I have been studying qigong and tai chi for six weeks to help understand the cultural confusion around the more obscure points of this ancient art in both theory and practice. The future of qigong development lies in effectively practicing and training in ways that promote health, relaxed strength, balance, integrity, and spiritual well-being as the necessary foundations for health advancement in body, mind, and spirit. This paper presents a look into a personal inner journey of healing that puts responsibility on the individual and which can be supported, understood, and integrated into our health system.

## Qigong: Mind Body Connection

### History

The beginnings of qigong are hidden within the mysteries of ancient Chinese culture. This practice of energetic knowing may have emerged naturally in the rice fields of medieval China. Slow-paced farmers, deeply attuned to the rhythms of nature, observed methods through which life was nurtured in plants and animals, and then, by a sort of quantum entanglement, these organisms continued to imitate those principles (Cohen, 1997).

In definition, qigong means working with life energy and learning how to control the flow and distribution of qi to improve the health and harmony of the human mind (Cohen, 1997). Qi can be described as life force or vital energy (Yang 2005). A living thing is filled with qi, a dead thing has no more of it. The earth itself is moving, transforming, breathing, and alive with it. When we appreciate the beauty of animals, flowers, trees, mountains, the deep oceans, and floating clouds, we are sensing their qi along with the rest of the earth (Cohen,1997). Gong is the essential foundation or our internal power experienced as inner tranquility. It is and has been a greatly kept secret of the art of qigong for centuries. Gong is accumulated through meditation or nurturing of the mind (Yang, 2005).

Historical references indicate that qigong-like practices were common in aristocratic households from ancient times. Huang, the Yellow Emperor, is considered the originator of many health and longevity practices linked to qigong. His discourses were recorded in a text called *The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine*, which first appeared in writing about 300 B.C. and is still considered the bible of Chinese medicine. However, these practices were kept secret and passed along to only a few specially chosen families in each generation. For hundreds of years, they

were never taught to the common man (Holden, 2011).

The secrecy around qigong teachings led to the development of thousands of different styles. Each family or village developed their practices separately and passed them down selectively within their own lineage. A few examples of distinct styles of qigong are Tai Chi, Animal Frolics, Eight Pieces of Brocade, Swimming Dragon, Microcosmic Orbit, and Six Syllable Secret (Holden, 2011).

Qigong was included within traditional Chinese medicine, where many of the physicians were also qigong masters. Qigong was their treatment of choice, and if that practice wasn't enough to restore balance to a patient, the physician prescribed an herbal formula and/or acupuncture. Over the years, medical qigong became the leading medical practice, providing steady development and greater systemization of qigong methods (Cohen, 1997).

A huge cultural change occurred after the fall of the Ch'ing Dynasty when Cultural Revolution leaders attempted to modernize Chinese society and reorder it according to Communist principles. Ancient practices of Chinese Medicine were questioned and devalued as archaic. Anyone involved in prohibited pursuits were jailed and the flourishing practice of qigong came to a temporary standstill. Fortunately, revolutionary leaders soon realized that it was wise to continue Chinese Medicine, and qigong was removed from the ban (Cohen, 1997).

In 1985, the Chinese government approved formation of the China Qigong Science Association. Since then, hundreds of controlled scientific studies of qigong have been carried out with all of them showing positive benefits of the practice. During the 1990's, qigong gained world-wide recognition, and by 1996, there were more than one thousand published abstracts available in English on qigong research. In 1997, it was estimated that there were over one-

hundred-thousand practitioners of qigong outside of China. The practice continues to grow making qigong accessible to all as a form of exercise for health and healing (Holden, 2011).

### **Philosophy of Healing**

Qigong is a personal exercise, a personal form of energy cultivation, and a personal way of maintaining vitality and health. Qigong is a practice of controlling and directing the power within to heal and maintain the body. There are three main principles of qigong:

1. Regulate one's body
2. Regulate one's breath
3. Regulate one's mind

As stated by Zixin and their colleagues (2000), regulating the body is the mindful manipulation of the qi by performing a set of movements in order to stimulate qi in different parts of the body. Regulating the breath is the mindful act of breathing in a way that brings awareness to the breath and its connection with the physical body. Regulating the mind is to observe the mind in the daily practice of meditation. The qi goes where the mind goes.

Historically there have been various schools of qigong including:

1. Yi: Medical;
2. Ru: Confucian;
3. Dao: Taoist;
4. Shih: Buddhist; and
5. Wu: Martial.

Each qigong school embodies the three main principles of moving the energy body, regulating the breath while cultivating qi energy, and stilling the mind. Yang (2006) states that the word qigong is an ancient Daoist philosophical term symbolizing the interaction of yin and yang,

which are the opposite manifestations of the same forces in nature. The dynamic interaction of yin and yang is that they are complimentary opposites. Each necessarily relies upon, and gives birth to, the other. Because everything is in constant change, all process is cyclic, and everything contains its opposite. The dilemma of what came first, the chicken or the egg, is transcended in Chinese philosophy by accepting them as inseparable agents of the process of creation. Chinese theory does not separate cause from effect; instead, the one turns into the other in an eternal repeating cycle of metamorphosis. The day does not cause the night, birth does not cause death, summer does not cause winter, but one precedes, and the other follows. Yin or yang and what came first (linear logic) matter less than how they interact (systems) (Beinfeld and Korngold, 1991).

Understood in another way, the concepts of yin and yang describe the human life cycle and life experience. The stages of life move from conception to birth, growth, decline, and death. Our youth is our *Yang*: quick, erratic, and light. Our older years are our *Yin*, slower, more deliberate, and persevering. Life requires one to balance interior processes of nurturing self (yin) with being engaged in the exterior work of the world (yang) (Yang, 2006). Our activity in the world fosters our productivity, then we retreat from the day to relax, rest, and replenish our qi for the next day. We can over engage in life which is to over indulge in yang or become overly focused on nourishing our interior which is an over emphasis on yin. The key philosophy is to achieve balance between both states. This is both the external and internal practice of qigong.

Inner balance lies in the maintenance of a pattern of ever-changing qi in relation to yin and yang at all levels of human function, as well as in one's habits and environment. Each individual is responsible for their own internal and external harmony. Qi gong as an energy-oriented practice becomes the art of health integrating body, mind, and spirit (Micozzi, 2011).

The holistic nature of qigong is perhaps best summarized in the classical *Song of Real Meaning*, where its highest goal and purpose are distilled into a single sentence: “With your whole being, develop your life” Yang (2006).

### **Requirements for practice**

Qigong is an art form that has been passed down through the centuries. There is a saying that the “internal qigong art is a gift that can only be handed down personally from teacher to student” Yang (2006). The quality of the teacher is an important factor in understanding the practice and its ultimate benefit to the student. One must find a teacher who knows the art, or at the very least, will get one started in the correct form. This is an important requirement for acquiring a deep internal practice.

The style of qigong is not as important as the foundational principles of qigong which are the same in all styles. The level of physical exertion can easily be adjusted to suit a person’s physical capabilities. After you have learned the principles and have achieved a sufficient level of skill, any movement can be done as qigong movement.

Meditation is the most fundamental; and therefore, the most important of all qigong exercises. Without meditation, there is no qigong. Acquiring the fundamental *gong* for qigong internal practice begins with daily meditation practice. The *gong* that is the foundation of the art is the source of both qigong skill and improvements in health. If you practice cultivation of *gong* you will have both and more. Any reasonable exercise can improve health, and for many, even empty slow movement is significant exercise. But the benefits of internal practice are exceedingly greater than an incomplete external approach to the art (Yang 2006). As stated in the philosophy of the practice, qigong is the art of connecting mind, body, and breath with deep awareness of the integral nature of these main principles.

### **Integration with biomedicine**

During the last 20 plus years, qigong has spread to the United States. Its beneficial effects have stimulated the research interests of Western scientists. With the prevalence of ageing populations in the United States and increases of chronic diseases, interest in qigong has continued to grow as potential source of healing. Published results from well controlled studies about the effects of qigong, particularly those focusing on older adults, have added to the understanding of the characteristics of qigong movement and its impact on health and longevity.

#### **Where does qigong fit into biomedicine?**

According to Shinnick (2006), qigong is both a physical and mental exercise. Medical qigong integrates Western medical theory and scientific technology into its study of health and disease therapy in patients and incorporates the resolution of disease symptoms and movement toward cures for health. For example, in older adults in the terminal phases of chronic heart disease, qigong therapy can help with de-synchronization of rapid breathing, disturbed sleep, edema, coldness, and blood pressure drops. As medical qigong is translated for various diseases, one will be able to see that qigong techniques are as varied as the schools, and the three principles can be used to treat and cure a variety of diseases (Shinnick, 2006).

According to Li, Hong, and Chan (2001) exercise has definite effects on the health of older people, but appropriate forms are scarce. Aging is usually accompanied by a significant decline in organ function, joint degeneration, poor eyesight and balance, and loss of stamina. Qigong movement offers lower physical impact benefits for the older population, as well as facilitating a lifestyle that promotes wellbeing.

As stated in the clinical trials and controlled experimental studies by Li and their fellow researchers (2001), a total of 2,216 men and women showed that qigong exercise has beneficial



effects on cardio-respiratory and musculoskeletal function, posture control capacity, and the reduction of falls experienced by older adults. These studies show that the regular practice of qigong (over 15 weeks at 15 minutes twice a day) can produce significant benefits in older adults by improving cardiorespiratory function or delaying its decline. The results also showed qigong after 15 weeks reduced the number of falls in older adults by 47.5 percent. In a comparative article on cross-sectional analysis of health by Komelski, Miyazaki and Blieszner (2011), between experienced qigong practitioners and respondents from a U.S. dataset, the findings suggest that practitioners of qigong on average are experiencing significantly better health in middle and late adulthood than many other Americans are, even those with similar incomes and education levels. These findings promote further investigations of the effects of mind-body practices on health across the adult years.

### **Benefits and Limitations**

In recent research among older adults addressing qigong health benefits, Jahnke, Larkey, Rogers, Eitner, and Lin (2010) identified nine categories of positive qigong intervention:

1. Psychological effects
2. Falls/Balance
3. Cardiopulmonary Fitness
4. Physical Function
5. Quality of Life
6. Bone Density
7. Self-efficacy
8. Patient Reported Outcomes
9. Immune Function and Inflammation

Based on the substantial potential for achieving health benefits, the minimal cost incurred by this form of self-care, and the apparent safety of implementation across populations, qigong provides an attractive and effective life-style modality (Jahnke, et al., 2010). Qigong teaches us how to take our lives into our own hands. By practicing qigong and cultivating internal and external energy, we learn once again how to live in relationship with the universe. Reid (1998) stated: “The spirit of the universe creates life by organizing the power of energy with wisdom and love. Those who call upon that power must do so with due respect for the wisdom and love that command it, for in the grand order of the universe wisdom, love and power and inseparably linked” (p. 305).

### **Personal experience with Qigong Master**

My interview with tai chi and qi gong Master Malcom Dean of the Hunyuan Tai Chi Academy of San Francisco has helped me understand another layer of awareness that has been missing in many mindfulness practices. In my study with Malcom, he has taught me that the core principle behind the practice of qigong and tai chi is inner energy cultivation. Malcom teaches that we are made up of four bodies, which are:

<u>Chinese</u>	<u>English</u>
Shen	Spirit Body
Yi	Mental Body
Qi	Energy Body
Li	Physical Body

These four bodies require mindful connection in order to reach our full potential and ultimately flourish. Qi, or the energy body, is the energy that connects us to the universe and can be measured indirectly by practice and growing awareness. The mind-body split is manifested in the

body as stress, anxiety, depression, and despair. The bridge that connects the mental body with the physical body is the cultivation of and awareness of the energy body. Cultivating mindfulness, in part, is the interface between the mind and energy body. The physical body will easily connect once the awareness and connection of the mind and energy bodies are developed.

Qi goes where your mind goes. In the practice of qigong, the practitioner becomes aware of the energy body by relaxing the body and calming and focusing the mind. Qigong is movement practiced slowly, accentuating the intention, mechanics, accuracy, and precision of the motion. In all movements in qigong, internal and external, we are nurturing our qi or energy body. Movement in qigong is meaningless without intention. One cannot transfer energy without mindful intention. Meditation is the door to mindful intention.

Meditation is the most fundamental; and therefore, the most important of all qi gong exercises. Without meditation, there is no qigong or tai chi. Acquiring the *gong*, which is the foundation of the art for qigong, begins with meditation practice. Meditation is practiced standing or sitting or lying. Yang (2006) states, “Those who do not practice meditation will always be afflicted with the ‘monkey mind’ racing to their desires and therefore will remain unable to truly enter quiet contemplation. They will never find peace or be able to realize and understand *gong*. You cannot fool this natural law” (p. 54). Meditation is the starting point for qigong practice. How deeply you can go into quiet is ultimately a personal and spiritual issue. You cannot live your life antithetical to spiritual well-being and expect to truly enter emptiness and tranquility in meditation practice each day.

Through the mindfulness practices of meditation and qigong as moving meditation, participants will learn to experience internal discipline and openness to the mindfulness training

that will lead to a better understanding of the four bodies, and the possibilities of connecting these for enhanced health and well being (Dean, 2015).

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