

WHAT IS QIGONG?

By Kenneth S. Cohen

We live in a field of Qi, "vital breath" or "life energy." Yet, like a fish in water or a bird in flight, we are unaware of the medium that supports us. Qigong means "working with the Qi." It is the ancient Chinese art and science of becoming aware of this life energy and learning how to control its flow through a precise choreography of posture, movement, respiratory technique, and meditation. Like biofeedback, qigong teaches psycho-physiological self-regulation; the student becomes aware of bodily functions conventionally considered involuntary-- blood pressure, respiratory rate, even the flow of blood and nutrients to internal organs-- and learns to restore a healthier balance. However, unlike biofeedback, no technical devices are needed. Qigong is one of the most cost-effective self-healing methods in the world. The only investment needed is time, a half-hour to an hour each day; the dividends of better health, increased vitality, and peaceful alertness accrue daily and are cumulative.

Qigong is like a great river fed by four major tributaries: shamanism, spirituality, medicine, and martial arts:

1. Shamanism: An ancient text, The Spring and Autumn Annals, states that in mythic times a great flood covered much of China. Stagnant waters produced widespread disease. The legendary shaman-emperor Yu cleared the land and diverted the waters into rivers by dancing a bear dance and invoking the mystical power of the Big Dipper Constellation. As the waters subsided, people reasoned that movement and exercise can similarly cause the internal rivers to flow more smoothly, clearing the meridians of obstructions to health. Qigong-like exercises are found on ancient rock art panels throughout China. Chinese shamans used these exercises and meditations to commune with nature and natural forces and to increase their powers of healing and divination.

2. Spirituality (Taoism and Buddhism):A. Taoism. Qigong philosophy and techniques are mentioned in the classic of Taoist philosophy, the Dao De Jing, written in the fourth century B.C. "By concentrating the Qi and making your body supple, can you become like a child?" Qigong was the ideal way for Taoists to realize their goal of wuji, an empty, alert, boundless state of consciousness, and xing ming shuang xiu, "spirit and body cultivated in balance." Taoists and qigong practitioners were both looking for a harmony of yin and yang: inside and outside, earthly and spiritual, stillness and activity. The majority of works on qigong are still found among the approximately 1,100 texts in the Taoist Canon.

B. Buddhism. The Buddhist emphasis on tranquility, awareness, and diligent practice are part of qigong. Several styles of qigong were developed by Buddhists who needed an exercise and healing system to complement their lengthy seated meditations.

3. Medicine: Chinese medicine includes acupuncture, herbalism, massage, diet, and qigong. Qigong is the preventive and self-healing aspect of Chinese medicine and was used in the past, as today, to teach patients how to improve their own health. The major early text on qigong is the Dao-yin Tu "Dao-yin Illustrations" (168 B.C.). Dao-yin is an ancient word for qigong. This work contains illustrations of forty-four qigong postures prescribed by ancient Chinese doctors to cure specific ailments. The patriarch of Chinese medicine, Hua Tuo (second century A.D.) was one of the great early qigong masters. His "Five Animal Frolics" imitate the movements of the Crane, Bear, Monkey, Deer, and Tiger and are still practiced today. Hua Tuo said that just as a door hinge will not rust if it is used, so the body will attain health by gently moving and exercising all of the limbs.

4. Martial Arts: Qigong practice can improve performance in the martial arts or any other sport. Chinese martial artists designed or helped to improve many qigong techniques as they looked for ways to increase speed, stamina, and power, improve balance, flexibility, and coordination, and condition the body against injury. Qigong was a major influence on the development of western gymnastics, thanks to Jesuit P. M. Cibot's 1779 illustrated French translation of Taoist qigong texts: Notice du Cong-fou [Kung-fu] des Bonzes Tao-see [Taoist priests]. Cibot's descriptions inspired Per Henrik Ling (1776-1839) to create the first school of modern gymnastics in Sweden.

You can see why it is hard to find a simple definition for such a comprehensive system of mental and physical development. Qigong is a spiritual practice with roots in shamanism and Taoism. It is a powerful method of self-healing and a warm-up for any sport. It includes both exercise and meditation.

Qigong is practiced by more than 80 million Chinese people and probably by tens of thousands in the United States and Europe. Qigong has been rigorously tested in controlled scientific experiments and clinical trials and is often used as an adjunct to conventional allopathic medical treatment. Hypertensive patients who take medication and practice qigong fare better than controls who only take the medication. Similarly, there is solid evidence that qigong can improve immune function and mental health, and prevent disabilities that come with age. Qigong acts like Vitamin C, increasing the activity of an enzyme that helps to deactivate free radicals, highly reactive chemicals that promote tissue degeneration and loss of memory. In 1995 the Journal of the American Medical Association published evidence that Taiji Quan, a form of qigong, is effective at preventing loss of balance and falling injuries among the elderly. Researchers at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine confirm that Taiji Quan works like aerobics at reducing high blood pressure.

There are thousands of styles of qigong. Some are designed for general health and well-

being and may be practiced every day for a lifetime. Others are therapeutic and targeted to cure specific problems. Qigong techniques are suitable for men and women, young and old, athletes and sedentary, and for the disabled. All styles are based on similar principles: relaxed, rooted posture; straight, supple spine; diaphragmatic respiration-- the abdomen expanding on inhalation, retracting on exhalation; fluid movements without excess effort; and tranquil awareness.

Quality is more important than quantity. Students are advised to learn one or two qigong styles that are enjoyable and effective. Finding a qigong lao-shi, qigong teacher, is not an easy task. Although qigong is popular, the training is not standardized-- I do not believe that it can or should be-- and both quality and qualifications can vary immensely from teacher to teacher. There are unfortunately too many con artists, charlatans, and magicians among our ranks, trying to impress the public with stunts of allegedly supernatural Qi-power such as pushing objects without touching them. Students should apply the same standards of professional excellence to qigong teachers that they would apply to teachers of any other subject. A qigong lao-shi should be humble and compassionate and open to questioning and dialogue. He or she has not arrived at a final goal, but is rather on a never-ending quest for expanded potential and deeper understanding.