

Demystifying *Qi Gong*

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Qi Gong is broadly recognized for its therapeutic effects in the Chinese medical community, and increasingly in the modern medical community as well, yet it remains a practice shrouded in unnecessary mystery. What will it take to bring *Qi Gong* to the place yoga is now, where one can find regular classes at most fitness centers across the country? The question can't be answered in one short article, but our first priority must be in clarifying what makes real *Qi Gong* different than other methods of health cultivation. After successfully building a *Qi Gong* class in the strange environs of a modern gym, I have a few basic insights to share about how to bring our methods to the mainstream.

Unfortunately, we are starting at a significant disadvantage, as the phrase "*Qi Gong*" is a long way from having one commonly accepted meaning. For some people it evokes images of exotic people in silk pajamas, moving slowly on a clifftop by the ocean. For others it might be a practitioner laying hands on someone else, using their breath, intention, and energy to heal. And for others it might mean a solo practice of meditation, hard training and creative visualization to build martial and psychic power, or to foster spiritual growth. Frankly, for most Americans, it probably doesn't mean anything.

As Traditional Chinese Medicine providers, it is incumbent on us to approach *Qi Gong* with an understanding that is not mystical, foreign, or other-worldly. So what is the essence of *Qi Gong* for TCM practitioners? It is a method of fostering basic awareness of body and breath, coordinated with simple movements, with the aim of cultivating smooth flow of *qi* to promote health. It is critical to communicate to our patients and students that the gateway to *Qi Gong* is not through some portal bedecked with dragons and tigers in some far-off land. It doesn't demand faith, special uniforms, ineffable transmissions, or beautiful landscapes. Foremost, it is vital to explain that *qi* isn't some magical force that emerges once we've purified the body, silenced the mind, and harmonized the emotions. *Qi Gong* begins with connecting with how your body, breath, and mind feel, exactly in this moment.

If we want people to follow us through the gate of *Qi Gong* practice, we have to keep it incredibly simple. So, let's try a basic exercise together. Take a deep breath in, then release. No really, do it! What's there? The pressure of your weight on your seat, if you are sitting. The space inside your body changing as the breath moves in and out. Perhaps some tension in some muscle groups. The patter of thoughts, up in the brain. Our mind will naturally come up with names for these experiences. For our purposes, we are just trying to connect with the quality of feeling awareness that is before these names - that, which experiences these different levels of our being. It's critical that we do not try and change anything at this point. Rather, we start with what is actually here right now.

With just a little bit of attention, we begin to see that these sensations, feelings, and thoughts occur in a spectrum - from the very dense sensation of embodiment in gravity (down/earth/yin), to the rarified realm of ideas (up/sky/yang), and the subtler nuance of breath and emotions that happens between

these two poles. And here's the real transmission - it is this whole collection of experiences that is actually our *qi*. This recognition is the portal to real *Qi Gong*, and it certainly does not require some *Qi Gong* "master" to point out. Yin, Yang, and *qi* are experiences that we all have, all day long.

Instead of introducing our patients and students to *qi* as something distant and mysterious, we start right where we are. As I noted above, I find the phrase feeling-awareness, or aliveness are often better to use than something from a different language. What we are looking to get our patients and students to recognize is this basic subjective sense of being alive, which is the most immediate and concrete thing in the universe. Without trying to define or capture it too tightly in thought, we can then begin working with it in the context of simple movements, coordinated with the breath.

Most everyone agrees that the breath is a great way to bring more awareness to the mind-body connection. Breath is the great mediator between the denser "body" and the lighter "mind" ends of our mind-body spectrum. Respiration is unique because it will conveniently take care of itself if we don't pay attention to it (involuntary/body), but will also obey our commands if we choose to give it a specific task (voluntary/mind). It impacts our emotions, as taking a few deep breaths to calm down clearly demonstrates. Breath is also affected by emotions, as the shortened breaths of someone anxious or stressed shows us. So if we move the body in a simple pattern while coordinating the breath, and pay attention to what's happening, we begin to "fill in the blanks" between the mind and the body, and see that there actually never was a separation.

For many this may seem rudimentary, but then the people reading this periodical are steeped in the sophisticated language of meridians, elements, and different kinds of *qi*. Our patients, students, and friends may come from a very different place, where it may be a radical idea that doing an activity while actually paying attention to it differs from doing the exact same activity while listening to headphones, reading a newspaper, and watching a television out of the corner of your eye. It often seems like the job of the modern fitness center is to distract you from your body any way possible while you get your time in and your calories off! One day the cable TV was out at my gym, and there was practically a riot.

As non-specific as the phrase "*Qi Gong*" may be, the key is that we recognize that it is this quality of making the effort to be with your sensations (a practice called "mindfulness" in some communities), which makes it different from other activities. We can do any manner of convoluted visualisations and complicated techniques, but if we aren't starting from basic feeling-awareness, we are just playing mental games. We can push our bodies to the limit, but if we aren't with our sensations, we are also still standing outside of the gate. We spend so much time embroiled in fantasies about places we aren't, planning for the future or stewing over the past, looking to embellish or mask what our basic existence feels like right now. The simple act of coming into our own present-tense can be a profound therapy to address the many ills that result from this preoccupation. We may very well find that in cultivating this habit of presence, a sense of space and ease reveals itself to have always been right here all along.

Qi Gong practice has a long way to go before it becomes as mainstream as other traditional methods of health cultivation. It will have to adapt, just as yoga has, to meet some of the expectations of our fitness-oriented culture. I'm confident that if we can lead our students and patients to the gateway of feeling-awareness, we can preserve what is unique to these time-tested methods. As the baby-boomers age and the gym-going culture realizes that peak fitness is not a viable (or even desirable) goal, *Qi Gong* will become an increasingly attractive alternative.

Over the past couple years, I've built a class of very dedicated students in a traditional gym, without turning my class into "Power *Qi Gong*," or "*Qi Gong* for a Great Butt." As long as we keep it simple, focus on the present moment sensations of *qi*, and not lose ourselves in esoterica, *Qi Gong's* future in the West is promising.

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