



# An Introduction to Qigong & Tai Chi

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*Editors note: This is the third in a series of articles examining various self-care options.*

Qigong (or, Chi Kung) is a set of ancient health care practices from China. They have been practiced and refined over the last 5,000 years. Qi/Chi refers to our vital energy and Gong/Kung means work, self-discipline, or mastery. Put together, Qigong is the process of working with or mastering your vital energy. The wide variety of Qigong practices all combine physical postures, breathing techniques, and focused intention. They include countless forms of laying, sitting, standing, and moving meditations that are done as self-care exercises for either physical or spiritual benefit. Qigong also includes techniques of Medical Qigong where a master practitioner directs Qi in order to help heal a patient. This article, due to space limitations, will focus mainly on the self-care exercises.

What is commonly referred to as Tai Chi (or, Taiji) is a martial art that is more correctly referred to as Tai Chi Chuan (or, Taijiquan). Tai Chi Chuan is a popular form of Qigong whose slow, gentle movements all have martial intent. There are a number of different styles of Tai Chi Chuan, such as Yang, Wu, or Sun, as well as short and long versions of each. Additionally, there are simpler Qigong exercises that are often practiced as adjuncts to the Tai Chi Chuan forms. Though the original intent of the movements is martial, many people practice Tai Chi Chuan solely for the health benefits. The phrase "Tai Chi" by itself more appropriately refers to the philosophy to which Qigong and Tai Chi Chuan are connected. To better understand Qigong and Tai Chi Chuan, it is helpful to understand this larger philosophy.

There are two concepts from the traditional Chinese understanding of the world that are important to know. The first is the concept of yin and yang. Yin and yang are opposites of each other, and this concept of opposites is applied to every tangible thing that exists in the universe. If you look at the yin/yang symbol to the far right of the diagram below, you can see how the two halves are interconnected. Indeed they are not just interconnected, they rely on each other. Yin can't exist without yang and vice versa. For there to be an up, there has to be a down, for there to be light there must be dark, if there is an inside there must be an outside, and so on. All of our physical reality can be paired up as sets of opposites. However, just as in typical western religion there was a time before the world was made, so in Chinese cosmology there was a time, or a state, that existed before all of the sets of opposites came into being. This level of existence is known as Wuji, or the original state. Tai Chi refers to the mechanism that derives all sets of opposites from Wuji. This mechanism, this Tai Chi, can be referred to as mind, force, or god. (see illustration, below)



(over)

## Benefits of Qigong & Tai Chi Chuan

- Increased oxygen uptake & utilization
- Reduced blood pressure
- Increased bone density
- Increased strength (especially in legs)
- Increased range of motion & flexibility
- Reduced levels of stress hormones
- Improved immune function
- Slower declines in cardiovascular power
- Heightened mood states
- Helps prevent falls in the elderly
- Improved posture
- Improves activities of daily living for those w/Parkinson's, rheumatoid arthritis, osteoarthritis, & multiple sclerosis
- Beneficially alters the lipid profile.
- Conditions the fascial sleeves between muscles & nerves
- Focuses & strengthens the mind / will
- Helps ease headaches & backaches.
- Helps maintain health into old age.
- Helps speed recovery from illness.
- Helps calm the mind.
- Helps reconnect to practitioners's spirit.
- Encourages positive outlook & discourages harmful attitudes & behaviors.
- Helps create a balanced lifestyle, i.e. greater harmony, stability, & enjoyment.

*The above benefits are a combination of those verified by western research, eastern research, and practitioners' experiences. Some benefits may apply more to some forms than others.*

The second concept from traditional Chinese thought is that everything is infused with energy, or Qi. There are actually different types of Qi, but for now we will use it in its generic form. Since everything is infused with Qi, that means our bodies are too. In our bodies, Qi travels along meridians, or pathways, which follow the lines of fascia (fascia, or connective tissue, is what holds all the other parts of our bodies together, right down to the cellular level). In western terms, this Qi of the body would be referred to as bioelectricity. The most well known means of conveying bioelectricity are the nerves, which most often travel along sheets of fascia. Just as on the universal level Tai Chi (force, god) directs the energetic possibilities of Wuji to become separate yin and yang forces, our mind is what directs Qi through our body.

Therefore, in order to work with or master our vital energy we must develop our mind, or Tai Chi. Qigong exercises (incl. Tai Chi Chuan) do this in two ways. The first is by increasing our ability to focus and concentrate, which is why they are considered forms of meditation. The focus of the meditation can be the form itself, the breath, or a specific visualization. When visualization is used, it is often concerned with directing Qi through different parts of your body, and can additionally include visualizing Qi outside of the body. The second way Qigong exercises develop the mind is by moving the body in a relaxed state. This is important, for in order for the body to be totally relaxed, the mind must be relaxed. In order for the mind to be relaxed it is necessary for it to let go of whatever thoughts that are keeping it and the body tense. A relaxed mind is better able to concentrate on what is happening in the moment. Even in sitting or laying down Qigong forms, it is important to be relaxed and comfortable.

Different Qigong forms have different goals as far as how the practitioner works with their Qi. Some forms aim to create an awareness of internal Qi, others to gather and increase it, some to circulate it to cleanse and heal the body, and some to store the Qi. Some Qigong forms may aim to specifically deal with yang energy, others yin energy, and others, such as Taiji, work with both. Forms that are more spiritual in nature may include ways of connecting the internal Qi to the universal Qi.

### **A simple Qigong exercise to help develop an awareness of your Qi:**

Start with your feet parallel and shoulder width apart, and knees soft. Make sure that your joints and muscles are relaxed as you move slowly through the exercise. Each breath should be full and relaxed, neither forced nor rushed. Your breath should extend all the way down to the bottom of your torso. Your arms should hang lightly at your side. Take a few moments to breath in this way, focusing on the breath. Then on an inhale, slowly raise your arms up in front of you to chest height. Let your wrists lead your arms up as you imagine that you are holding a ball of energy between them, about the size of a beach ball. On the exhale, lower your arms back down, imagining that you are pushing the ball of energy back down to waist height. Your fingers should slightly trail your wrists. Again, let the muscles in your arms remain relaxed. This is the whole exercise. As you continue to repeat the movement, slowly allow yourself to become aware of energy inside yourself that mirrors the movement of the ball of energy you are holding. As you raise your arms the energy moves from your lower belly (the lower dantien) up through your torso, and as you lower your arms the energy moves back down through your torso until it comes to rest where it began. Try to perform the exercise for 5-10 minutes at a time each day. As thoughts try to enter your mind, don't fight them, just gradually let them go and gently return your focus to the ball of energy in your hands and the awareness of the energy moving along with it inside you.

## **For More Information**

**YMAA Website** ([www.ymaa.com](http://www.ymaa.com)). This is where I purchased the dvd listed below in the references. This is a wonderful resource where you can purchase all sorts of books related to Qigong and Taijiquan and other martial arts, as well as information on its schools, a nesletter that you can read online, and more.

[http://www.chiexplorer.com/newsletters/084/084\\_A.html](http://www.chiexplorer.com/newsletters/084/084_A.html). This is a very interesting article that deals with ways that external Qi is measured as it relates to Medical Qigong and other energy healing techniques, and mechanisms for non-contact healing.

If you are interested in learning Taiji (Tai Chi), check with your local YMCA or Mercy Healthplex, as many of them offer classes.

<http://www.stonerivertaichi.com> - holds a cincinnati class in Tai Chi/Taiji and also classes in Dayton, OH and Yellow Springs, OH.

## **References**

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