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In the next issue I will discuss more exercises and describe a QiGong class.

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Introduction to QiGong

From *The Chinese Way to Healing: Many Paths to Wholeness*

by Misha Ruth Cohen, OMD, with Kalia Doner

Perigee Books, 1996

Additional information by Larry Wong, "Wong's Taiji & Qi Gong for Health"

Exercise/meditation is the fourth pillar of Chinese medicine therapy -- joining the first three pillars of acupuncture, herbs, and dietary therapy. I recommend QiGong to many of my clients as part of a total program. For those who are not particularly interested in exercising, it offers immediate gratification -- you feel good right away -- without having to go through a painful aerobic routine, join an overcrowded health club, or spend money on equipment. For those who are exercise enthusiasts, it offers the health benefits of running or weight training without the risks. And it does what other forms of exercise cannot do -- it strengthens and harmonizes the flow of Qi.

QiGong exercise/meditation is a unified process dedicated to creating balance, strength, agility, and grace to assure vitality through old age. QiGong and its offshoots, Kung Fu and Tai Chi, have evolved as the logical outcome of the Tao and recognition that the body is infused with Qi, which must be nurtured and tended to if wholeness is to prevail.

When you start practicing QiGong, the primary goal is to concentrate on letting go, letting go, letting go. That's because most imbalance comes from holding on to too much for too long. Most of us are familiar with physical strength of muscles, and when we think about exercising we think in terms of tensing muscles. Qi is different. Qi strength is revealed by a smooth, calm, concentrated effort that is free of stress and does not pit one part of the body against another.

The Basic Techniques

1. Concentration: Concentration leads to and results from Qi awareness, breathing techniques, and QiGong exercises. It is a process of focusing in and letting go at the same time. Focusing does not mean that you wrinkle up your forehead and strain to pay attention. Instead, through deep relaxation and expanding your consciousness, you are able to create a frame of mind that is large enough to encompass your entire body/mind/spirit's functions, yet focused enough to allow outside distractions, worries, and everyday hassles to drift away.

This inward focus that expands outward to join you with the rhythms of the universe epitomizes yin/yang. Yin tends to be more expansive and yang more concentrated. You discover your yin/yang balance by treating yin and yang as ingredients in a recipe -- you add a bit more yin, a dash of yang to make the mixture suit your constitution or circumstances. Some people need more or less yin or yang in various situations.

You will find that as you do exercise/meditation you become more adept at this form of concentration, since it is the natural expression of the practice. And as you learn to concentrate more effectively, you will find you have greater power to affect Qi through various QiGong exercises or through the use of other focused meditations and Tai Chi.

2. **Breathing:** Lao Tzu, from the 6th century BC, first described breathing techniques as a way to stimulate Qi. From there, two types of breathing evolved: Buddha's Breath and Taoist's Breath. Both methods infuse the body with Qi and help focus meditation.

Buddha's breath. When you inhale, extend your abdomen, filling it with air. When you exhale, contract your abdomen, expelling the air from the bottom of your lungs first and then pushing it up and out until your abdomen and chest are deflated. You may want to practice inhaling for a slow count of 8 and exhaling for a count of 16. As you breathe in and out, imagine inviting your Qi to flow through the channels. Use your mind to invite the Qi to flow; you want to guide the flow, not tug at it or push it.

Taoist's breath. The pattern is the opposite of above. When you breath in, you contract your abdominal muscles. When you exhale, you relax the torso and lungs.

3. **Qi Gong routines:** There are two basic types of QiGong activities: *Wei Dan* (external elixir) and *Nei Dan* (internal elixir). Both focus on strengthening and balancing the Qi by using dynamic routines and still postures, but they approach the tasks in two different ways.

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