

The Movement of Qi

Hwa Tuo (circa A.D. 200), perhaps one of the greatest Chinese Medical Physicians in history, was fond of saying “a door’s hinge will never become insect riddled.” By this expression, he stressed the importance of movement in the prevention and curing of disease. And while physical movement is key to structural and cardiovascular health and well-being, Hwa Tuo was specifically referring to the mysterious flow of Life Force in the body, called *Qi* (pronounced “chee”) in Chinese. Qi is the energy or natural Life Force that pervades the Universe. It flows through all living things and is considered to be a Divine animating force. Humans acquire, store and produce Qi through eating, breathing, and through living in harmony with our natural surroundings, including our interactions with other people. It is also believed that we acquire energy from our spiritual approach to life (interestingly enough, no specific method is prescribed, only that we have a sense of being “connected.”) The Qi we acquire is stored in every organ, cell and structure of our bodies. From this perspective, we are human batteries.

The concept of Qi is central to all Chinese medical theory, ranging in practice from acupuncture, herbal medicines, Chinese bodywork (called Tui Na) and Qi Gong (Life Force cultivation) practices. A person’s health and emotional well-being are dependent on two factors: There must be an abundance of this natural Life Force energy in the body, and the dynamic distribution of this energy flowing throughout the body must be in balance. An imbalance of Qi in the body creates a disharmonious internal environment, and this, according to Chinese Medical practitioners, is the beginning of disease.

First the Qi is either obstructed or depleted or both. The reasons for this can be many: A poor diet, exposure to harmful elements such as cold, dampness, heat, chemical toxins, etc., an injury such as a sprain or a broken bone, emotional factors (perhaps the leading cause in American society) such as prolonged stress, anger, grief and anxiety, or simply too much of one way of living: too much working, too much pleasure seeking, over eating, sleep deprivation; in short, anything that is an external imbalance can lead to an internal imbalance. Generally speaking, most imbalances that occur in the body are corrected by the body without out ever having to do anything. The ingenious Design of a human body dictates that we strive for balance and harmony under all circumstances. But when the obstruction and depletion are so great that the body hasn’t either the access to its reservoir or its reservoir is empty, the imbalance continues. Over time, this imbalance impedes the proper functioning of organs, they become weak and may fail, or they may lose their resistance to the forces of disharmony such as bacteria, viruses and toxins, and we become ill.

Very early in my training, I asked my teacher how it was that some people would become ill and others would not. Chinese and traditionally trained, he was also

very fond of modern physics and used to talk a great deal about the various “frequencies” of Qi, producing either health or disharmony. He gave me an example. First, he said, there were many reasons: For some, it was lifestyle: Not enough rest, over working, a bad diet--all of these factors weaken a person’s healthy Qi and make him vulnerable. But these weren’t generally the causes, Tom said. “Mostly we generate the frequencies ourselves, without even knowing we do it. Suppose something bad happens to someone; maybe someone who he loves very much dies. He has grief. This is natural. But what he does with his grief isn’t natural. Maybe he pretends not to have it and goes back to his life. Well, the energy of grief wasn’t allowed to ‘pass through’ him. He didn’t give it time and didn’t give it a way, maybe through crying or talking or whatever he needs to do, to move through him and out of him. And so this energy gets stuck in his body. It might not do anything for a long time because his own Life Force is enough to keep it suppressed. But over time he has many demands on his energy and the energy of grief has been sitting somewhere in his body growing and changing, generating unhealthy frequencies and causing all sorts of health problems, physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. Maybe it sits in his lungs. Now he does something to make it worse: Maybe he takes up smoking. The frequency of tobacco, the energy it releases into his lungs, matches the harmful frequency of the grief that was already there, making the dangerous energy in his body grow stronger. This energy spreads to different places. Let’s say his colon. Only now he’s been eating a high fat diet and the energy of that food reenforces the harmful energy being generated in his colon. Well, in time, you can imagine what can happen. This energy starts to change the cells in his body. The cells start to mutate because they can’t survive in that energy the way they are. They change into cells that can survive in that harmful energy. The man now has cancer cells in his body. And those cells reproduce according to the energy they now generate.

“This is one way these diseased frequencies get generated in someone. But suppose that same person, the one with the loved one who died, did something else with his grief. Suppose he put all of his attention on grief. Maybe for years. For much longer than the natural process of grieving. Maybe he does it because he thinks that to give up his sadness would be disloyal to the person he loves. So he keeps this energy generating in his body for years. Remember, I told you a long time ago that whenever you give your attention to something, you also give it energy, and if you give it energy long enough, you will make that something stronger. Well, to give his grief a little energy early on was good. He gave it enough energy to move through him and out of him so it wouldn’t get stuck or stagnate. And then, when it moved through him, he could let himself release it. If he stopped there, he would be healthy. But he kept bringing himself back to his grief, and so kept generating this frequency in his body. He makes himself sick that way too. And if his lifestyle, his eating, working and resting habits, aren’t healthy too, he makes the problems that grief energy made much worse. And not all of his illnesses will be physical. He may develop emotional problems. He may lose his intellectual abilities. He might lose his faith, if he has

it, in God or in the Universe or whatever he believes gives him life and happiness.

“And another way is through heredity. If people in your blood line had disharmonies that were active when they produced a child it’s possible the child’s energy could contain those disharmonies too. The child’s parents could have produced those disharmonies throughout their lives, or they could have been passed to either of the parents from one or many generations back. It’s also possible, through sexual contact, to pass along disharmonies. Even if people are just sleeping next to each other their energies blend together and sometimes disharmonies can be passed that way too. They might not have any symptoms at all and may not know that anything is wrong because their energy is strong enough to keep any disease from forming.

“Of course,” he continued, “It can work in the positive way too. If one of the people of the couple has strong healthy Qi, he or she can strengthen the other, maybe even cure the person of something they didn’t even know they had. Or if the child of those parents with the disharmonies begins to practice Qi Gong, or does something like acupuncture or herbs or anything that makes energy grow stronger, the parents could get stronger and healthier too, even if the child is grown and lives far away. Genetically, they are still on the same energetic ‘radio station’ so distance doesn’t really matter. Nature’s design is that we are healthy and balanced, so a little bit of something good can undo a lot of what’s wrong, as long as it’s the ‘right’ something.”

The “right something” must involve the movement of Qi in the body. Modern medications will generally suppress the symptoms that often can become life threatening. If the disease is chronic we are placed on a sort of “pharmaceutical life support.” While many in the complementary medical community see this as “bad,” for the short term this is a very responsible thing to do, once a disease has a hold. The medications buy time and if the person is willing to seek out ways to improve his Life Force, to “charge his battery,” and is also willing to seek out ways to restore the balance of that Life Force, the the combination of East and West prevails very nicely. Of course, if our person in question had been maintaining his “battery” and his balance all along, the likelihood that medications would ever become necessary would be drastically reduced, but life has a way of throwing curve balls and no system, no matter how complex, can be prepared for every contingency. And certainly, blame has little place in the restoration of health.

As I mentioned before, acupuncture, herbs and bodywork are all excellent ways to restore the balance and strength of Qi in a person. Other traditions such as Reiki (a Japanese hands-on energy therapy), Pranic healing (a traditional energy therapy from India), Yoga and meditation to name just a few all offer wonderful potential for a person’s recovery. All of these, in fact, according to Traditional Chinese Medicine, would be considered forms of Qi Gong, that is, Life Force

cultivation in one form or another. The formal discipline of Qi Gong, however, is an art unto itself.

Qi Gong is an art and skill to train Qi, Life Force. To be more precise, it is the method by which the practitioner performs physical and mental exercises in order to calm the mind, relax the body and then promote and conduct the smooth flow of Qi. This is most often done through associating the mind, postures and breathing in harmony with one's whole self. The effects of this practice regulate the functions of the mind and body, maintaining a dynamic equilibrium, and slowly cultivate the body's ability to "store" energy by reducing its energetic consumption through more efficient functioning and increasing the bio-energetic conductivity between cells. As the smooth flow of Qi is achieved inside the body, so it also has the effect of harmonizing the practitioner with the endless oceans of energy that surround all of us. From within this dynamic balancing and cultivation a person may enjoy good health and a clear and tranquil mind, and, over time, the ability to pass on this abundance of Life Force through the art of Qi Gong therapy, as well as the ability to energize the aspects of his life that are more to his liking, and "healing" those aspects which are not.

Qi Gong has long been regarded as a mystery to some and superstition to others, so it is best to define the terms as best as we can. Historically, Qi Gong was treated more as a technology, one that was wholly contained within the practitioner but could be shared with anyone. Up until about 50 years ago, much of this internal technology was kept secret, passed between family members, or given to the most trusted students, or kept within temple walls. For many who used Qi Gong for its martial benefits, it meant the difference between victory and defeat, to say nothing of survival. For those who used Qi Gong for its health benefits, particularly those physicians who passed their Qi to afflicted patients, often with seemingly miraculous results, Qi Gong provided success as a physician and, in some cases, fame. There were also those who misused their skill and used their energy to harm or manipulate others, and so who was trained depended a great deal on a master's assessment of his students' characters.

The Types of Qi Cultivation

There are perhaps thousands of types of Qi Gong. Traditionally, and from its broadest perspective, Traditional Chinese Medicine would define Qi Gong as any exercise, physical, mental or spiritual, that increases the vitality and well being of the practitioner. And so, weight lifting could be seen as a Qi Gong that increases the size, strength and vitality of a person's muscle structure. Meditation may be seen as a Qi Gong that gives the practitioner greater mental agility, clarity of mind, and an expanded view of reality. Prayer may be seen as a particular type of Qi Gong referred to as a Shen Gong ("shen" is translated as "spirit"), that is, focusing one's attention on the Divine, so that one may realize the Spirit of the Divine more fully in his or her existence. The major schools in China consisted

primarily of Confucian, Daoist, Buddhist, Martial and Medical. Many of these "schools" had a great deal of overlap. A physician who cultivated Qi for the sake of maintaining his own health and passing on his abundance of Qi to his patients, may very well have also practiced one of the Buddhist techniques to assist him in becoming free from suffering through expanded consciousness. A martial artist practicing Tai Qi Chuan, may also have employed some of the Daoist techniques to harmonize with the forces of Nature. A Confucian, primarily concerned with making himself and others better suited to fulfill the needed roles of society through Qi cultivation, may also have experimented with some of the Daoist methods of divination, especially those using the The Book of Changes (I Ching) that was popular to both schools.

Even today, there is a great deal of overlap among those who practice types of Qi Gong. Perhaps the most interesting are those exercises that include aspects of different schools within their "new" forms of cultivation. Master Ou Wen Wei's Pan Gu Shen Gong, employs the use of a mantra, "Take Kindness and Benevolence as Basis. Take Frankness and Friendliness to heart," to "attune" the practitioner to the spirit and energy of the Creator (the Chinese word "Pan Gu" refers to God). Master Ou's technique also requires a "transmission" of some sort. Using this as a definition, Reiki, the Japanese art of energy healing, is also considered to be a Shen Gong, in that energy and information are transmitted to a person and then that person attracts the same frequencies of healing energy and is able to direct this energy on behalf of another for the purposes of facilitating their healing. What is interesting in both Pan Gu Shen Gong and Reiki is that there is seemingly no depletion of the practitioner's energy (assuming the techniques are performed correctly) but rather the practitioner himself receives a sort of "residual" healing.

Other techniques are not as clear, such as Master Yan Xin's Nine Step Qi Gong, which, while having an emphasis on strong moral behavior, does not ascribe to any system of belief, however loosely. Master Tom Tam's Da Peng Gong does have a story from Chang Tzu around it, but there is no interest in creating a spiritual movement. And some systems of Qi Gong seek to cultivate Shen through imitation, such as Hwa Tuo's Five Animal Frolics, one of the first recorded systems of Qi Gong. In this form, the postures of a tiger, deer, bear, ape and crane are adopted to draw upon the natural shen of these animals, as well as to promote the smooth flowing of Qi that is accumulated. In acupuncture theory, the 8 Principles Theory works primarily with Qi, discovering its qualities and imbalances, and then uses acupuncture techniques to clear harmful qualities of Qi and to restore balance. In the current Five Element tradition, a practitioner is more concerned with the intrinsic shen of his patient. He uses acupuncture technique to create an environment for the spirit of the person to express itself more fully.

Both Qi Gong and Shen Gong increase the health and vitality of a practitioner. In Qi Gong, the Qi is exercised and made stronger. As mentioned earlier, Qi is the

animating force which flows through all living things. It exists everywhere, permeates all things, is in the air we breathe, food we eat, water, trees, plants, minerals, animals--everywhere. To paraphrase one of the greatest Tai Qi Masters in history, Cheng Man-Ching, no fish is ever aware of the water he swims in for his entire life. Similarly, very few of us are aware that we are surrounded, indeed, "swimming in" this animating force at every moment of our existence. This is a natural, not supernatural phenomenon. With a Shen Gong, the emphasis is that we are, all of us, created out of the same Source. This means that each of us is part of the same Spirit (different aspects of the same Being). When practicing a Shen Gong, the practitioner is calling on an aspect of that Spirit to manifest more fully in his body and movements. In Traditional Chinese Medicine, there is the understanding that wherever Shen is present and active, Qi will accumulate. Since Shen has consciousness and intelligence, it is not unusual for results to come very quickly. Through Shen Gong Qi is accumulated through Spirit. Through Qi Gong one has a greater ability to access Shen. Neither way is superior. Only that method that best suits each practitioner is best. Once Qi is cultivated, a person's intention and focus (called, simply, Yi in Chinese) may be amplified, allowing for the intentional directing of Qi for specific purposes; for the improving of one's health and well-being. Even seemingly external circumstances may be changed for the better since, according to modern physics, all things are energy. If the quality of energy is improved, the outcome of how that energy (person) interacts with another energy (life circumstances) will also be improved.

Qi Gong has become a popular topic and there are many books, videos and classes being offered. To say that one teacher or one book or instruction method is better than another is to miss an important point: The cultivation is about achieving *balance*. If a person is attracted to one method over another it probably means that that person's intuition is aware of his imbalances and is seeking to bring himself into balance. Intuitively, one will "feel" that one method is superior, simply because it will address certain types of imbalances. The same can be said of teachers books and videos.

In truth, we move our Qi all the time. The food we eat, the people we interact with, the work we do, our recreation and environment, all play a role in our strength and balance. Each of us, without ever actually realizing it, is a Master of Qi Gong. Our strength, then, depends on what we choose consciously. And this, it could be said, is the true Art of living.