

## CHAPTER ONE: WHAT IS QIGONG?

*“Practicing qigong is like stepping into a river of healing energy.” - Anon*

### A Working Definition

The ancient Chinese who developed qigong held a conviction that humans have the capacity for self-cultivation – that through clear, focused exercises we have the ability to improve our health, develop our awareness and human capabilities, and extend our life span. Further, by applying the qualities of our practice to the rest of our life, greater success and meaning can be brought to all we do. In short, through meaningful, consistent practice, we can become masters of our selves.

The word qigong has two parts: “qi” and “gong”. Understanding both their meanings offers us important clues as to the nature of this art. The first term, *qi* (or *chi*) is often translated as “energy” or “life force”. It can also be interpreted as “breath”, which is an indication of how important breathing is to this practice.



*The Chinese characters for qigong.*

As we might expect, the quality of our qi is very closely influenced by our breath. It is also influenced by our heredity, the food we eat, physical exercise, sufficient rest, our environment, the quality of our thoughts and emotions, and whether we cultivate our qi through some form of regular, conscious practice. A strong and balanced qi greatly supports our health, our mental state, and our ability to become fully realized human beings. As we continue, it will help to have a further understanding of qi and how qigong practice relates to Chinese Medicine.

Metaphorically, we can think of the cells of our body as trillions<sup>1</sup> of little machines. The “electricity” which powers these machines and moderates their function is the qi. It is supplied to the cells via a network of pathways referred to as meridians in Chinese Medicine. This network is composed of the 12 primary meridians, 8 “Extraordinary” ones, and many additional smaller pathways and tributaries.<sup>2</sup> Along this energy network are numerous “acupoints” that act as “relay stations” regulating the flow of energy through its pathways as it supports our cells, tissues, organs, and organ systems. Acupuncturists stimulate these acupoints with fine needles to therapeutically influence the flow of qi through the body.

It is believed that illness is often the result of a blockage or interruption in the smooth and balanced flow of qi throughout the body. Thus, the acupuncture, herbs and other modalities of Chinese Medicine are largely concerned with restoring a strong, harmonious energy flow. Once balance is restored, the body will tend to heal itself. My personal experience with acupuncture and acupressure, has proven this to be true – often in dramatic fashion.

Qigong has been an important part of Chinese Medicine for thousands of years. Like acupuncture, qigong seeks to balance and strengthen the flow of energy through the body’s meridian system. It works to remove blockages and correct imbalances while promoting smooth, harmonious circulation

<sup>1</sup> Current studies state that there are approximately 37.2 trillion cells in the average human body!

<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that many practitioners of qigong and Chinese Medicine believe that our meridians are not limited to our physical body but exist in fields that surround the body as well.

and stronger muscles, tendons, ligaments, and bones. Again, the principle is that a clear, balanced chi flow enhances the body's natural ability to heal, maintain vitality, and support long life.

Practitioners of Chinese Medicine also encourage qigong practice as it provides their patients with a means to raise their level of self-awareness and mental/emotional state. This alone can be powerfully healing and transformative. Certain methods of qigong have the added feature of developing our ability to absorb, expand, concentrate, and extend qi within and around the physical body for various other purposes as we will discuss a bit later. Regular practice thus provides the patient/practitioner with a self-empowering means to improve and enhance their own health and self-expression.

*"The Master dances qigong.  
He moves as if entranced in a  
tango with the Universe."  
- Garri Garripoli*

While we will have more to say about Chinese Medicine and our subtle energy system as we progress, I also encourage you to further your understanding through any of the excellent resources in the *Recommended Reading* section of this book, or wherever your studies may take you.

The second part of the word qigong is "gong" (or *kung*) and is much simpler to describe. It is commonly translated as "work". It also means, "to develop, cultivate, or refine". Generally speaking, then, we could simply define qigong as "energy work" or "energy cultivation".

In practice, however, we notice that qigong is actually a "whole human" discipline. The exercises involve and integrate all aspects of who we are: physical, mental, emotional, and energetic. Further, if we think of our spirit as our true self in connection with Source (however we might define that for ourselves) then qigong practice can include this level as well. These more subtle areas directly involve our state of awareness, which is a function of our attention and current point of focus. Indeed, as far as we humans are concerned, any form of energy cultivation necessarily involves our state of mind. For this reason, I prefer and use the following definition:

*Qigong is the cultivation of our energy and awareness.*

With this definition, it soon becomes apparent that qigong does not *have* to involve a set of memorized movements. Many activities have the potential of becoming a form of qigong. Walking, jogging, kayaking, weight lifting, even washing the dishes has the potential to become a type of energy/awareness cultivation. Many of our qigong's traditional methods, techniques, and movement sets are greatly beneficial, but the vital ingredient is our *intention* and the *principles* we apply to our activity.

## **Various Kinds of Qigong**

Before beginning a particular qigong practice, it is helpful to have a sense of what kind it is and the purpose for which it was created. Essentially, there are two general "styles" of qigong and four basic purposes for which they are typically practiced.

In the broadest sense, we can say that *qigong* exercises, of which there are a great many, fall into two different styles: External cultivation practices, or *waigong*, and internal cultivation practices, or *neigong*. There is, however, some debate as to exactly where to draw the line between them. I see them as existing along a continuum. On the far left extreme I place "pure" internal practices in which there is little or no physical movement and an emphasis on breathing and meditative technique. These primarily internal practices seek to develop qualities such as heightened awareness, thorough relaxation, deep *chi*

cultivation and circulation, and other more esoteric objectives. On the far right end of the extreme, there is an emphasis on movement and building stronger muscles, tendons, ligaments, and bones and a somewhat different quality of *chi* circulation. Some *waigong* practices also seek to develop improved speed, endurance and coordination as for martial arts purposes.

As a general rule of thumb, the difference between the two can be summarized thus: *Waigong* practices achieve chi cultivation primarily through movement and breathing and so it is more focused on the limbs and external tissues of the trunk. *Neigong* practices rely more on focused attention and breathing so it is more concerned with the core and more subtle aspects of the body. In my opinion, both approaches are important and complimentary and I encourage students to practice at least one exercise from each category. This course will offer several approaches to each. I would also add that as one's proficiency in qigong grows, they will likely notice that their external practices will tend to take on more of an internal "feel". I see this as a sign of heightened sensitivity to ourselves and our surroundings. Developing this sensitivity can further influence our practice in profound and satisfying ways.

Beyond the basic styles, every qigong exercise or system was created with a particular purpose(s) in mind. We can think of four basic categories of qigong which reflect a system or technique's primary objective. The four basic categories include the following:

1. *Qigong for Health and Longevity*: Exercises of this sort are designed to enhance our health and wellbeing in a general, overall way. They tend to strengthen organ systems such as circulatory, digestive, nervous, musculoskeletal, etc. They also serve to help strengthen and balance qi flow through the meridian system. Such practice helps maintain a long and healthy life and often will correct minor to moderate health issues along the way.

2. *Medical Qigong*: These exercises are more specific than those in the above category and are designed to directly address issues such as hypertension, chronic pain, cancer, arthritis, athletic injuries, and much more. Practitioners of Chinese medicine will often teach or prescribe specific qigong practices to support other treatment methods. Also in this category are techniques whereby a qigong practitioner will extend or emit their own qi to assist in their patient's healing process.

*"Practicing qigong is so simple and so powerful. You cannot do it wrong. You can only do it good, better, or best." - Chunyi Lin*

3. *Martial Qigong*: These practices are specifically designed to augment various styles of martial art. Improved qi circulation, relaxation, and repetition helps improve strength, speed, coordination, and the ability to receive impact without being injured. Some of these exercises are very beneficial while others must be practiced with caution and with the guidance of an experienced instructor. Within this category are practices that can be adapted and applied to various sports as well.

4. *Esoteric or Spiritual Qigong*: This category of practice is far more subtle. Spiritual traditions such as Taoism and Buddhism have various practices designed to help the practitioner achieve higher levels of spiritual "enlightenment." They emphasize the development of a calm, centered mind and a harmonious, peaceful heart. Specific visualizations, hand positions, and other methods of focusing energy are often utilized.

Practicing any good system of qigong will grant us benefits beyond those of its primary purpose. For example, we might notice how a *medical qigong* practice that helps improve kidney health will likewise improve our overall health, give us more energy for our tennis game, and also help calm and

center the mind. All of this may assist one in experiencing a broader spiritual awareness or openness to such ideas (whatever those might be for someone). Qigong works holistically this way because all good practices utilize the same basic principles as we'll see below. *The key is to find a practice that speaks to you and then stay with it long enough to deeply absorb its benefits and then expand from there.*

## **Dynamic Qigong**

I often use the term “dynamic” to describe qigong because dynamic means *change*. More specifically, the word refers to a system or state of constant change, movement, and inspired progress. It relates to people who are filled with a positive attitude, good energy, and new, refreshing insight. Regardless of style, these are all qualities we want to bring to our practice of qigong in one way or another. Good qigong is change work and we realize higher attributes of our own nature as a result of good practice.

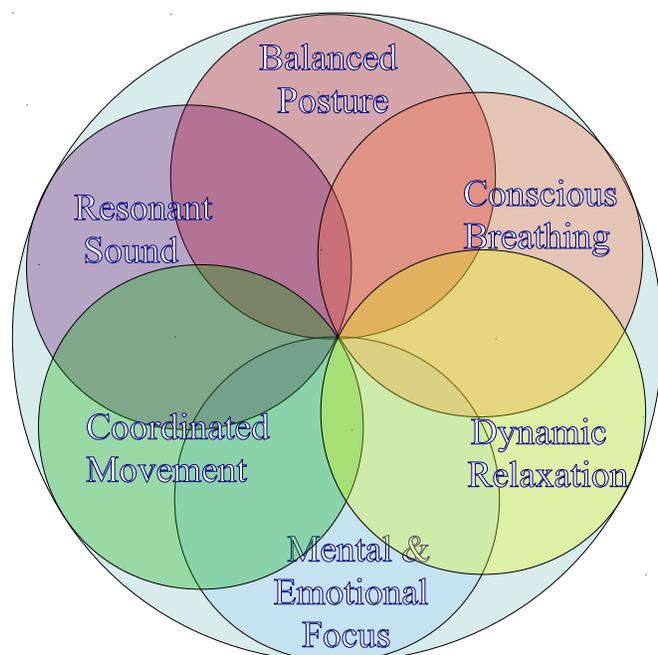
To this end, we need not tether ourselves dogmatically to stylized patterns of movement, thought, or form. Rather, we can use these elements as they are helpful and allow them to *evolve* in our practice, moment by moment, to best serve our highest wellbeing and the wellbeing of those around us.

We might also notice that beneficial change occurs in our lives for two basic reasons: it can occur through the spontaneous power of “grace” - that mysterious aspect of ourselves and life that emerges when the timing is just right and allows for rapid transformation in subtle or dramatic fashion. And... it happens as a result of our consistent efforts – our daily pursuit of practices and principles that uplift, inspire and energize us. Ideally, we welcome both. The former through simply offering our grateful permission for change to occur through grace and the latter through the application of consistent, healthy, good-feeling practice.

## **Seven Key Principles of Qigong**

At this point, let's introduce Seven Key Principles found in nearly all good qigong practice. Bear in mind that these are not the only principles to be found in this vast study – they are, however, the most fundamental. This course is based upon the study and development of these core qualities. They can be summarized as follows:

1. Balanced Posture
2. Conscious Breathing
3. Dynamic Relaxation
4. Mental and Emotional Focus
5. Coordinated Movement
6. Resonant Sound
7. The *Practice* of Mastery (The continual practice of principled, intuitive self-cultivation)



*The diagram above illustrates the interrelated nature of these seven principles in which each one supports and is part of the others. The flower in the center represents the principle of mastery – the continual cultivation of the other six qualities.*

Each of these 7 qualities is fully integrated with and supports the others. Indeed, to apply one quality to its highest degree actually *requires* the proper use of the others. For instance, it is hard to think clearly if one's breathing is inhibited or if one is very stressed. Coordinated movement will be difficult if the mind is scattered and the body tense. On the other hand, as we cultivate one of these principles, each of the others is developed as well. For instance, the more we improve our ability to relax, the more easily we are able to refine our breathing, posture, and so on. *This especially true as we work consciously with the relationships between these principles and apply them in daily life.*

## **A Short Experiment**

To illustrate the importance of our Key Principles, try this little two part experiment. It's quite obvious, but the implications are important.

**Part 1:** Stand for a moment with a slouched posture: let your head and shoulders hang down and collapse your chest. Now, tense up your muscles so that your whole body feels a bit tight and your movement is restricted. Next make your breathing shallow and pull it way up in the chest. Now, think about the evening news or some unsettling image from the past. Hold this position without any change for at least 30 seconds. Now, simply notice, without judgment, how you feel mentally, physically, and emotionally, then shake it out so you're back to normal.

*“If you want to be healthy and live to be one hundred, do qigong!” - Mehemit Oz*

**Part 2:** Okay, now allow yourself to align your posture: head upright, shoulders comfortably down and back, feet shoulder width apart and knees slightly bent. Take several deep, *easy* breaths, and as you exhale, allow yourself to *relax* and let go of any tensions. Gently adjust your position as needed to improve your feeling of ease and comfort. Continue to breathe deeply and think of a time in which you were highly successful at some task that was important to you. Or think of an image or scene that brings you a sense of peace or happiness. Continue this for at least 30 seconds. Once again, notice how you feel physically, mentally, and emotionally.

If you participated in this little experiment, you will likely have observed some significant differences between these two ways of using your body and mind. This obvious example simply illustrates that we have the power to directly influence how we feel on *all* levels and at *any* time. We need not be at the effect of apparent circumstances – we can literally create the quality of our experience. And the more we practice a few very simple ideas, the better and more masterful we will become.

This exercise also demonstrates that the principles we will be working with are immediately effective in creating results when we apply them. A great many people go through their whole life without ever considering *how* they stand not to mention how they breathe, move, or think. The practice of qigong seeks to cultivate these very basic life principles as fully as possible and then go further still...

As we progress through this course, we will look at each of these 7 key qualities in depth. We will see how they are naturally developed and how we can use them to create the benefits that come from regular qigong practice. We will first take a look at these specific benefits and how we can clarify our motivation for successful practice.

## The Benefits of Qigong

The ancient Chinese developed qigong to help people achieve greater harmony with nature. Nature here refers to our own *true nature* as well as to the natural world in which we live and are a part. They acknowledged that much of society (even then) was out of balance both internally and externally. Conscious intervention was called for. They sought to create practices in which we might reclaim our potential as human beings living harmoniously and masterfully upon the earth. While millions have achieved extraordinary results through this practice, humanity as a whole is still in the process of creating the kind of peaceful, wide scale social change that remains our greater possibility. For me, this is one of the key reasons for consistent, uplifting practice. It all begins – and continues – with each one of us.

I would summarize three *general* objectives in qigong as follows:

1. To improve our health, vitality, and longevity
2. To acquire greater awareness and connection with our own true nature and potential
3. To extend our practice so as to create greater well-being and peace in the world

Some of the more specific and tangible benefits of qigong practice are below. Note that many of these are supported by current scientific research and observation.<sup>3</sup>

- ▶ Improves our ability to relax and reduce stress
- ▶ Improves our ability to breathe deeply and easily.
- ▶ Improves our overall muscle tone and core strength
- ▶ Improves our ability to quiet and center the mind
- ▶ Improves our ability to calm our emotions
- ▶ Improves our flexibility and coordination
- ▶ Strengthens our qi flow giving us greater energy and vitality
- ▶ Strengthens our immune system
- ▶ Improves our overall health and sense of well being
- ▶ Certain practices, especially those found in medical qigong benefit our organ systems and can assist in healing many specific ailments.
- ▶ Additional benefits exist as one's practice becomes more advanced and specific.

## What do You Want?

The above discussion represents the general landscape of opportunity in the practice of qigong. Now let's get personal. It is your natural birthright to achieve greater vitality, peace, and fulfillment in your life. The key to progress seems to lie in the conviction that we *can* achieve what we truly value in life. And then to take the necessary, heart-felt action to do so.

Though it may not always be apparent, we are amazing life affirming beings and our potential is always tugging at our shirt, encouraging us to higher levels of self-expression. As you engage with this natural instinct, clarity is essential. And, as with any system of self-cultivation, you'll succeed to the degree that you develop an inspiring sense of purpose. You must know why *you* practice.

A successful, beneficial practice takes commitment, faith in yourself, and a measure of imagination. Mere curiosity won't be enough to sustain you in the long run. It will take a clear goal to keep you in

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<sup>3</sup> The Qigong Institute (<http://www.qigonginstitute.org>) and the National Qigong Association (<http://nqa.org>) are two good resources for modern research into the effects and benefits of consistent qigong practice. Most importantly, notice how you feel after including it in your life for a few weeks.

the game long enough to experience lasting benefits for yourself. After that, you're pretty much home free and qigong will become *your own* dynamic and evolving art form. So, before we continue, let's take a few moments for greater clarity.

At this point, I suggest you get a notebook that can serve as your practice journal. Having a place to record what you are learning, thinking, and experiencing can greatly support your momentum and progress.

Your first entry into this notebook is one of the most important ones you will make. The following questions will help you nail down exactly what you wish to achieve with this study. Just let yourself write the first things that come to mind. There are no wrong answers.

1. What interests me in the study of qigong?
2. What do I desire to achieve from this practice? (1-3 specific objectives)
3. How much time am I willing to put into practice each day? (Note: it doesn't have to be much, but consistency will serve you well)
4. Imagine yourself 6 months from now. You have completed this course, established a regular practice, and integrated the principles into your life. What does this look like in its best possibility? Perhaps you notice your health and energy have improved. Perhaps you have become inspired to make additional positive changes in your life. Perhaps you have gone on to study Tai Chi or advanced qigong practice. Write down whatever comes to mind...
5. Are you willing to make a consistent, enjoyable effort to achieve this for yourself?

If you just answered “yes”, congratulations! We are ready to proceed. Know that your personal objectives will probably change over time, gaining greater depth and specificity as you grow in your practice. This, of course, is a good thing. We will also talk more about the “why” of practice in the section on personal mastery.

## Gearing Up to Succeed

Achieving success with qigong training can be distilled down to three basic components. When all three are present, you are practically guaranteed to see good results. We'll look at each in turn.

**1. Consistency** While this may be quite obvious, it's worth emphasizing. Regular scheduled practice time is the fuel that takes you forward. It is the environment in which we grow and achieve our goals. Consistency in your practice is even more important than “how correctly” you practice. *Consistent* and *conscious* practice of anything, even if done “imperfectly”, will produce learning. From learning comes progress. In a moment, we will discuss setting up a training routine. Once your routine is in place and it becomes a habit, you will have a powerful wind at your back to take you forward. Practice, practice, practice... and enjoy the ride!

*Walter Landor once said, “We talk on principle, but act on motivation.” Thus, every good effort to develop inspiring motivation is worth our while.*

**2. Enjoyment** This is perhaps the greatest secret of effective practice. There are at least three reasons for this. The first is simply that we tend to do things that we enjoy. If you create your practice in such a way that you look forward to and take pleasure in it, you will experience consistency, inspiration, and benefits, even from day one. Second, enjoyment encourages your mind to explore and more easily learn and develop. This helps keep our practice fresh and relevant and uniquely our own. Finally, when we do things we enjoy, our body releases healthy, beneficial chemicals. This creates a positive feedback

loop. So as we continue, remember that you have the capacity to enjoy, adapt and expand on the materials and ideas we will cover. Practice so as to feel better and better each time. Ponder the different ways in which your practice can enhance your well being and then allow it to do just that through your own focused attention and wakefulness.

**3. Application** Application is about our ability to go *deeply* into our practice, applying what we learn on physical, mental, emotional and energetic levels. It is the quality we bring to our practice, how well we choose to do what we do.

It also refers to our ability to take what we learn and use it in our daily life. A saying from yoga expresses this perfectly: "Remember to take your practice off the mat." As an example, I regularly ask myself such questions as "how can I use my breath more effectively while I'm driving?" or "how smoothly can I circulate my chi while walking, working, or waiting for the bus?" These kinds of questions inspire internal changes on many levels, which produce external change as a result. Learning and progress are assured when we apply ourselves consistently and creatively.

### Building Your Practice Routine

It is said that 80% of success is simply "showing up" for those things in life we value. Thus, the biggest boost you can give yourself is simply to keep to your routine in the most optimal setting possible. So before we get into actual techniques, let's first establish the best time and place for your practice. The following are some general guidelines to consider:

- ▶ It is usually best to practice at the same time of day, each day. This helps develop a positive habit which adds momentum to your efforts.

- ▶ Choose a time during which you will be as free from interruption as possible.

- ▶ For many people, it is ideal to practice first thing in the morning and then again in the evening before sleep. If this doesn't work in your schedule, choose a time that is best for you.

- ▶ It is generally best to have one particular place in your home that you use for practice. It can be as large as a spare room or as small as a corner in your bedroom. It could also be a patch of grass in your back yard or a spot on your porch or deck. Over time, this space will take on a kind of supportive energy that is surprisingly palpable. You can anchor your intention in this space by placing a vase of flowers, a candle, a painting – whatever comes to mind to make it more focused and meaningful for you.

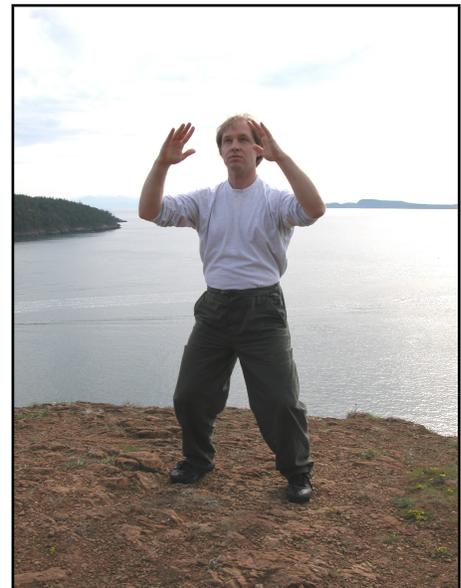
- ▶ Keep your qigong space well ventilated and free of clutter.

- ▶ It is important to be comfortably warm when practicing indoors or outdoors.

- ▶ It is best to not practice on an empty stomach, nor when full. Again, just feel comfortable.

- ▶ Wear comfortable, loose fitting clothes. Natural fibers are best, but not essential.

Remember that a training routine is a dynamic thing. As life conditions change, your routine might need to change as well. If you find that after starting, your routine doesn't quite fit your circumstances, allow yourself the freedom to modify it accordingly. But after each adjustment, let yourself eventually settle on a *regular* schedule. Remember that your opportunity for success is *vastly* improved when you



Practicing qigong in Anacortes, Wa  
(Puget Sound is in the background.)

have a consistent practice time. I invite you to now take a few moments to create your own practice routine.

Please answer the following questions in your notebook:

1. What is the best time in your day to practice: morning, afternoon, or evening?
2. Is it feasible to practice more than once a day? (While twice a day is preferable, it is not essential. Also, you need not commit to long periods of time. As little as 10 minutes per session is sufficient to begin.)
3. Given your answers to the above, what specific time slot can you dedicate to practice? Write down at least one consistent time per day for practice.
4. What location is best for your practice?
5. Do you need to make any changes to this location or to your schedule to accommodate your practice? (For example, you might need to set your alarm clock 15 minutes earlier for morning practice, clear away some space in a spare room – whatever you need to do.) Make the necessary changes.

Great! You now have a time and place established. Keep to your program, modify as needed, and we are well on our way!

### **Quick Review**

1. Qigong can be seen as the cultivation of our energy and awareness.
2. There are countless different approaches to qigong. In this introductory course we will focus on seven foundational principles and two specific practices. The better you grasp and develop these, the more effective your practice will become enabling you to then study more advanced practices as you choose.
3. There are a multitude of benefits attributed to qigong. Millions of people have used these exercises to produce profound healing and personal development through regular practice.
4. Three keys to success in qigong practice are consistency, enjoyment, and application.
5. The more clarity you have about why you practice, the more motivation you will have and the greater will be your results.

### **Action Plan for Lesson One**

1. Reread through this weeks lesson, taking any notes or noting any questions.
2. Acquire a notebook to help with this course and to record any thoughts, questions, and insights that occur to you as you progress.
3. Create your Training Routine – Establish a consistent time and place and make any adjustments to your lifestyle to facilitate your practice. We'll start in on practice content in Lesson Two.