



Working with our Life Energy. Improving Employee Welfare with Qi gong.

Nico Snyman

Sometimes we take the given for granted

On the next clear day, when you have a moment, take in the vast expanse of blue above your head, or when you see a bird seemingly gliding effortlessly on the wind, pause for a moment and think about the wonder of creation and the forces at play at that moment. Think about the mechanics of natural flight and the invisible air upon which it occurs. When next you remember to take an invigorating deep breath, pause for a moment and reflect on the cycle of life which is perpetuated within you through this simple act which we perform automatically and countless times during our lives. Take another moment to consider the source of life that imbues all of this universe of which you are part.

Now, for some, this discourse may start to take on religious, spiritual, philosophical or even metaphysical overtones, but nevertheless, give it a moment as it is intended to be a simple and pragmatic look at something vital to our lives. This is about the Life Force, invisible yet tangible, formless yet concrete, timeless, yet measured by man. This is about that which envelopes us, that which animates us and without which, life as we know it, cannot exist.

Just as birds fly in air, and fish swim in water naturally and without apparent conscious effort, so we, the human race, exist in a field of energy often without conscious attention or recognition of the fact. Importantly, not only do we survive in this field, we are sustained by it, our every thought and action depend on this energy or life force.

The ancient Chinese coined a name for this, they called it *qi* (pronounced chee). In ancient Egypt this was called *ka* - related to a soul that left the body after death - in Grecian times it was first referred to as *thymos* and then *pneuma* and in Sanskrit it is called *prana*. *Ki* is the Japanese term most closely aligned with *qi*. The word *gong*, means effort or application over a period of time. *Qigong* therefore literally means *Energy Work* albeit in a somewhat simplistic way.

From that wondrous moment of conception, we are supplied with an innate measure of *qi*, which we then draw on for the remainder of our natural lives. All the time however, this innate volume of *qi* is, and needs to be constantly supplemented by *qi* which we acquire through eating, drinking and breathing. The skill in *qigong* lies in developing recognition when we are drawing excessively on our innate *qi*, or when we are not adequately supplying ourselves with adequate supplementary *qi*. Ultimately, *qi* is free, and perhaps that is why it may often be taken for granted.

Quality of existence

By way of simple analogy, contemporary science informs us that the human being is in essence, a bioelectric mechanism with the 'control tower' and the attendant 'computer system' mainly located in the brain. The resultant functions and operations of the system which *per force* should provide quality and efficient output, are directly related to the quality of the information input and an uninterrupted flow of power or energy (*qi*).

A number of millennia ago, the Chinese came to the same conclusion albeit marginally different by way of terminology and exposition perhaps, yet fundamentally the ultimate diagnosis amounted to the same thing. It was also recognised then already that the collective health

and welfare of society firmly relied upon individual health and welfare as part of the whole. Productivity and survival hence, depended on individual health and a degree of robustness. It was therefore incumbent upon the individual person to take responsibility for personal health and well-being in order to be as productive as possible. Ultimately, it would appear as though they largely managed to bring this philosophy to fruition as it finally withstood the greatest test of all - time.

So, how do I know if I am connected to this flow of qi, if all is well and in place in my life according to this philosophy? By recognising a general sense of well-being, a feeling of equilibrium and that all my labours are actually a natural outflow of my being without apparent effort or endless deliberation. The Chinese term for this is *wu-wei*, or 'effort without effort'.

A brief history of qigong

Qigong forms part of the venerable tradition of Traditional Chinese Medicine. It was not always known by this name as such, but rather and most commonly as *dao-yin*, literally meaning "leading and guiding the energy". The distinguishing feature of qigong here is that the individual can do something for him or herself not only as a preventive measure, but also as a health maintenance regime.

In other words, a degree of self-empowerment is facilitated thereby. This is not just another fad or alternative remedy, the efficacy of qigong has been long recognised by the West and in fact it is considered to have had a major degree of influence on the Swede, Per Henrik Ling (1776-1839), founder of modern gymnastics. Today, the efficacy of qigong is supported by vast volumes of empirical evidence generated within a number of scientific disciplines both from the East and the West.

It is important to state that it is not suggested herewith that qigong is a panacea for all ills. It would also be erroneous to categorise qigong merely as a system of exercise, for it is far more than that. Ultimately it is a time-proven way of

living in mindful awareness that can assist us in achieving equilibrium in this fast-paced world.

How does it work?

Three basic principles underpin the system, often referred to as the "three regulations". It is suggested that by purposefully regulating the mind, the posture and the breath, that we can realign ourselves with the natural flow of qi. According to Traditional Chinese Medicine, illness or disease is caused by an interruption of, stagnation, excess or deficiency of qi. Based on this understanding, if the individual can become aware of the onset of undue tension, pain or other discomfort, something can be done about it. An old Chinese adage in this context says; "fix a problem whilst it is still small".

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Regulating the mind then, refers to training the mind not to expend excessive energy on generally less than useful thinking patterns such as worrying, anger and the host of other thoughts that habitually occupy the mind without necessarily seeming to bear fruit. An enhanced degree of awareness as to how we think, act, and react as a result is hereby developed.

Regulating the posture refers to cultivating a posture that is most conducive to ease of movement and balance. This has the effect of reducing the impact of gravity on the structure as a whole, thereby minimising the sometimes ravaging effects of time on the body. Correct

posture also reduces undue pressure on the internal organs thereby minimising the risk of the stagnation of qi, which as stated before, has proven to be deleterious to health. All the time, the individual is encouraged to apply the principle of being “*song*” (pronounced soong). This term denotes being “loose” or “light”. Rather than telling the person to relax, which often causes involuntary tension of a different kind, the relaxation response is allowed to arise naturally and without conscious effort.

Regulating the breath refers to utilising our lungs optimally, for it is a scientific fact that the majority of adults in the developed world only uses part of the vital capacity of these organs. It is the breath that carries life. At the most fundamental level, this discussion may be summed up by saying that the human body can survive without food for an extended period of time, not so long without water, minutes without breathing but not at all without qi. The breath and qi are therefore intimately connected and it follows that cultivating proper breathing techniques are vital to our existence.

One of the most frequently applied breathing techniques in qigong is what is called diaphragmatic breathing. The most vivid example of this form of breathing can be seen by observing infants at rest with the lower abdomen rising and falling gently with each breath. In the absence of infants in the house, have a look at the family cat or dog.

Perhaps you are already applying these principles to certain aspects of your life such as in a game of golf, tennis, or even when driving. What is being advocated here, is simply being mindful of the actions that constitute our existence. Every time you think of it now, check your posture and straighten the spine as comfortably as possible. Examine the breath, is it slow and full as opposed to rapid and shallow? What is the predominating thought that is occupying your mind at the moment? Stretch your body a little, take a slow and purposeful breath and finally, simply pay attention to how you feel at that precise moment. Congratulations, you are now starting to practise qigong!

What is the modern day application of qigong?

It is now widely accepted by both Eastern and Western medical fraternities alike, that chronic low-grade stress disorder can be linked to a vast number of chronic illnesses and the onset of disease. If only the individual was equipped or indeed possessed a heightened degree of self-awareness coupled with the will and skill to manage his health, a large number of maladies could be prevented. What if the perceptions and actions responsible for the stresses of modern-day existence, could be re-channelled or indeed converted into vitality? Let us briefly look at the effects of chronic low-grade stress on the human body.

Physiological Reaction Phases During the Stress Response

The Adrenal glands start secreting cortisol, cortisone, and catecholamines, (the body’s biochemical messengers of stress. Whereas this is appropriate for recovery after a real physical confrontation, if this phase is prolonged, extended production of cortisone and catecholamines combine to destroy the body’s resistance to cancer, illness, infection and the immune system is weakened.

The Thyroid in an actual fight or flight situation produces thyroid hormones which serves to burn fuel faster as an aid to boost energy production. In the absence of the real situation, these hormones now produce insomnia, exhaustion and shaky nerves amongst other symptoms.

The Hypothalamus produces the body’s natural painkillers called endorphins. This enables the person to continue to fight or flee even when injured. Continued and chronic exposure to distress ultimately leads to a depletion of the endorphins and may lead to aggravation of migraine headaches, backaches and even arthritic pain.

The production of **sex hormones** is reduced.

Co-ordination of the **digestive tract** is shut down so as to divert blood to the muscles for extra strength in an actual physical confrontation.

For short bursts of energy, the body needs **insulin to metabolise sugar (glucose)**. Today there is an increased risk of hypoglycaemia developing and in some instances, an increased insulin demand on the pancreas can aggravate diabetes.

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Where the blood sugar leaves off in supplying sustained energy to the body, the liver releases **cholesterol** into the bloodstream. The average individual generally does not require this extra cholesterol in a chronic stress situation and the cholesterol is deposited in the blood vessels. The effects of cholesterol and its link to heart disease is well documented.

High blood pressure results from a continued increase in the heartbeat rate. During the stress response, the muscles and lungs are fed more fuel and oxygen. Blood flow to the arms and legs can increase by as much as 300 - 400 percent. If the condition is left unchecked, high blood pressure can lead to strokes amongst other problems.

The **blood thickens and coagulates more readily**. This thickening of the blood during the stress response may result in heart attack or stroke.

In addition to these specific phases, all the five senses become acute and again, if this state persists, sensory burnout may result. A chronic low grade tension in the mind and body becomes the norm, breathing is shallow and irregular, the musculature and hence posture becomes distorted and regrettably, many people accept this as just the way things are.

At this point, I would like us to consider distress as the factor most commonly responsible for a large degree of general unhappiness ergo, ‘unwellness’ within us. Whereas it is not suggested that the practise of qigong would fully release us from experiencing stress, research has shown that sustained participation in this practise has a definite and positive effect in managing the condition.

In order to support this assertion, let us look at a summary of the possible positive benefits of Qigong based on research findings as recorded by Professor Ken Cohen.

Benefits of Internal Qigong supported by Empirical Evidence

Brain: Slow, high-amplitude brain waves, improved cerebral blood flow, less incidence of stroke, helpful for paralysis and seizure disorders.

Cardiovascular: Lower resting heart rate, greater cardiac efficiency, stabilised blood pressure, more ”good cholesterol”, less ‘bad cholesterol’.

Circulation: Improves micro and peripheral circulation. Shown to be beneficial for countering angina and migraine.

Digestion: Through the massaging effect on the internal organs, peristalsis and appetite are improved. Positive effects on constipation and ulcers.

Mental Health: *Decreased stress response:* - (anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorder, depression). Improved concentration, memory and interpersonal sensitivity.

Respiration: Slower respiratory rate, improved gaseous exchange, significant positive effects on asthma and bronchitis.

Immune system: More active immune cells. Better targeting of antigens, significant anti-cancer effects.

Musculoskeletal: Increased strength, flexibility, bone density, improved co-ordination, beneficial for arthritis and osteoporosis.

Ultimately, the life span may be increased on account of the synthesis of these positive factors. Other conditions and physiological phases that are enhanced positively, include vital capacity, hormone levels, kidney function, mental acuity, vision and hearing, skin elasticity, increased physical strength and libido

A small investment with long term returns

Qigong comprises of simple movements coupled with mindfulness and easy breathing. The apparent simplicity of the movements or forms as they are sometimes called, belies the inherent efficiency and power of the system. The tenets of awareness, balance, mindfulness, effortlessness and release of tension all contribute to self-cultivation. The sustained practice of qigong ultimately fosters the arising of flexibility, resilience and calmness, and quality of life is greatly enhanced as a result.

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There is no need for special apparel, equipment or even space. People of all ages and in differing states of health have become involved in practising qigong with positive results. Whereas qigong is not overly time intensive, this is not another “ten minutes a day to a better you” offer. Rather it is encouragement to inveigle some basic pro-active principles for a healthier lifestyle into our daily routine. To paraphrase the old masters on learning qigong; “...so that after learning and practising qigong for a while, that even though you may leave qigong, it does not leave you”.

How and where can I learn more?

An authoritative book on the subject is always a good point from which to start. The text should be clear and informative without allusions to “hidden powers or secrets”. (Two such works are referenced at the end of this article). Today there are literally hundreds of styles and schools of qigong across the world. A good teacher or master is obviously the most desirable option to pursue. When looking for a teacher, talk to the students first. Ultimately use discernment.

The final analysis

Like with all the good things in life, the rewards are exponentially related to the attitude, sincerity and degree of importance we accord them. In a world where economies are needlessly expending millions on healthcare and the concomitant loss of productive man hours, it would appear reasonable to assist people to care for themselves a little better. Qigong offers one such way. For to quote the father of allopathic medicine, Hippocrates; “ a wise man ought to realise that health is his most valuable possession” or to put it another way: “health may not be everything, but without health, everything is nothing”.

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