

Tai Chi and Qigong:

Building Blocks for Exceptional Health and Fitness



by Wesley Adams and Mark Brophy

It's a universal truth that with the coming of the New Year, people worldwide search out novel ways to improve their health. They join gyms, enroll in exercise classes, and buy books, DVDs or video games on everything for fitness. They engage personal trainers, adopt complicated eating plans, and may even resort to taking weight-loss supplements, all with the intent of getting or staying healthy and fit.

Wesley Adams, owner and head instructor of Columbia Tai Chi Center, and Mark Brophy, certified qigong therapist and instructor, discuss the art of Tai chi and the practice of qigong, two health-promoting fitness solutions practiced by nearly half the population in China. The duo answer questions, share the latest scientific findings relating to these “energetic” practices, and explain why they've joined forces to bring greater access to information and opportunities for the local community.

QUESTION: *Why are Tai chi and qigong less popular in the US than in China—especially if they are supposed to be good for health?*

ADAMS: That's a simple question with a complex answer; but generally speaking, Tai chi and qigong have not been around as long as other popular forms of exercise in the US. Very few Westerners had even heard of or had a chance to learn these arts until the

Chinese Cultural Revolution, which began around 1966.

BROPHY: The Cultural Revolution also changed the way people in China were allowed to participate in their own health care. Ancient healing arts that had been used for centuries were banned and its teachers imprisoned. A fledgling Western-style medical system that was put in its place was overburdened with caring for 4 billion citizens. This prompted the government to reintroduce the ancient arts. Chinese residents were now given access to different styles of health care, both ancient and modern. Many citizens who used to be able to practice Tai chi or qigong for their health benefits could now once again do so openly, and those exercises exist today.

ADAMS: With more and more research supporting Tai chi and qigong as health-giving practices, the traditional medical community in the US is only now starting to embrace these practices and offer them to patients along with or as alternatives to other forms of therapy. But even so, it's still primarily within the wholistic branches of modern medicine.

BROPHY: Also, until recently, Americans have been less interested in the medical or therapeutic benefits of qigong, drawn more to the martial aspects of Tai chi or by the beauty of the

flowing movements of the Tai chi form. Tai chi is the more popular version of these two systems of health exercises; I guess it could be considered the brand name, while qigong is the less familiar generic.

ADAMS: Generally speaking though, Tai chi is also the one that requires the most time and commitment to learn at the beginner and intermediate levels, which is hard for many people in today's society where what they really want is instant gratification.

BROPHY: Traditionally, the method of transmitting these arts has been a very slow process. That's because access to Tai chi and qigong instruction in ancient China were closely guarded family secrets, and this was because the family wanted to be sure that outsiders were truly loyal to the teacher and weren't going to give the information to a rival clan.

ADAMS: Historically, it would have taken years to learn one Tai chi form. Today, because we're not warring tribes, we're not battling each other over crops or land, instructors have accelerated the curriculum compared to how it used to be taught to accommodate our shrinking attention spans.

QUESTION: *Has anyone discovered of how or why Tai chi and qigong work to improve health?*

ADAMS: With each passing year, more of our modern research supports the ancient reputation of traditional Chinese medicine, which has always said that “energetic” forms of practice like Tai chi and qigong are good for us. We’re getting closer to understanding exactly how and why this kind of practice improves our health. We don’t have all the answers yet, but some of the latest research is very promising. There was actually a study that came out in 2011 that was led by a team in Massachusetts, where researchers documented changes in the brain’s gray matter—changes that were produced by “mindfulness” training over a period of about eight weeks. What this means for you and me is that training like Tai chi and qigong, or even yoga and meditation, actually changes brain structure. And it’s believed that the structural changes in the brain were responsible for the positive effects people reported at the end of the study, rather than people saying they were feeling better simply because they spent time relaxing.

BROPHY: This study fascinates me because researchers reported that the changes they discovered had taken place in the regions of the brain associated with memory, sense of self, empathy and stress. And even more impressive was how little time participants spent in this kind of practice each day. On average, they only spent 27 minutes—which means some practiced more, others a little less. I’m excited because for those who need proof, here it is—scientific evidence that supports traditional Chinese medicine and qigong practices that have been around for centuries. This means we can play a more active role to improve our well-being and quality of life through Tai chi and qigong!

QUESTION: *What are the differences between qigong and Tai chi?*

ADAMS: My typical answer is that Tai chi is a type of qigong that was originally designed to strengthen and realign the body while passing on martial applications used for self-defense.

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The fact that Tai chi also has many health-giving benefits is a bonus. And the focus of qigong is primarily for its health-promoting and healing properties.

BROPHY: First you have to learn the differences to realize that there are none. [Laughs.] It’s true that qigong is not typically used martially, but I encourage people to think of it as a way to fight for their health, for a better quality of life, for a longer life. In this instance, the opponents may be health issues from everyday stressors that show up in the form of symptoms, disorders and diseases. But both of these arts also have a preventive nature as well as a recuperative one.

QUESTION: *Why did the two of you get together and decide to offer both practices at one location?*

BROPHY: Tai chi and qigong have common origins, and each discipline has a slightly different emphasis and level of commitment; but together, they complement each other very well. While Tai chi is a part of my life and I understand its martial capabilities and the sport behind it, I focused on the health and healing aspects which are expressed more fully through qigong.

ADAMS: And my background has been almost the opposite. My focus with Tai chi has always been martial with a meditative aspect. Meditative in the sense of trying to increase happiness, and martial, not because I like

to fight, but because I wrestled in high school and I enjoyed the physicality of it. I love the fact that I don’t have to do other forms of exercise and Tai chi keeps me healthy. Over the years, I’ve been exposed to a lot of qigong and have a good basic understanding, but never really studied it deeply. When our paths crossed, Mark and I recognized that we had a unique opportunity to teach both at one location and developed the Workshop Series to complement the Tai chi program.

QUESTION: *Who should attend the workshop series?*

ADAMS: I consider it a way for anyone who has a question about qigong or Tai chi to get all of their questions answered. And you have the option of attending only one or two of the workshops, or digging deeper to expand your learning through the whole series if you’d like to. Or, if you happen to get really serious about training—and that’s easy to do when you begin to experience the positive effects Tai chi and qigong can have on your health and in other aspects of your life—you have access to regular practice through Tai chi without having to go out and search for a program.

BROPHY: The Qigong Workshop Series is also a great way for current Tai chi students and other martial arts practitioners to expand their knowledge. For example, many people believe that qigong was derived from Tai chi, when it actually flowed in the other direc-



Mark Brophy (left) and Wesley Adams (right) discuss the many health benefits of Tai chi and qigong.

tion—Tai chi sprang from qigong.

ADAMS: It's true. Ancient martial artists were looking for ways to be more effective because it was very different than our age of professional athletes with million dollar contracts, and sports psychologists or sports trainers to help them perform better. In ancient China if you lost a fight, you might die. So you were highly motivated to excel. Instead of trainers and psychologists, they had qigong masters who taught them how to focus their minds better, how to move their bodies and keep them healthy, how to perform better and develop higher levels of martial skill. And just to follow up on something Mark said earlier, about learning more about the roots of Tai chi, one of its roots is qigong, the other is kung fu.

BROPHY: When the first Tai chi form was being created in the Chen family, they took qigong postures and added martial applications—and Tai chi was born. So, as a response to a Tai chi person who says, "Why should I learn qigong?" Even if you care nothing about the healing aspects, learning qigong can serve as an educational foundation to help you better understand and execute your art.

ADAMS: I think when people start experiencing them, they will begin to see

how both of these arts come together.

QUESTION: *Are there situations where qigong would be a better choice for an individual than Tai chi?*

BROPHY: Generally speaking, people who want to get the greatest effect in the least amount of time as it relates to health would want to study qigong, especially if they're dealing with mobility issues. With qigong they can do a stationary or seated practice. The exercises are a bit simpler to learn, and you can become somewhat proficient in 20 minutes to an hour vs. the many postures and repetitions that the Tai chi regimen requires.

ADAMS: When a person learns Tai chi, they start moving across the floor. When they start learning qigong, it's quite possible that they won't move outside the reach of their own fingertips as far as the posture or movement goes. But I say it matters very little whether you prefer Tai chi or qigong. If you'll notice, Mark and I both practice Tai chi and qigong, and there is a reason for that. A famous qigong master once told my teacher that in the hospitals in China they teach you qigong to help you recover from illness, and then they advise you to go learn Tai chi to stay strong and healthy. It isn't an either/or thing because they both

Health should be considered a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity

complement and supplement each other wonderfully. So, simply bring an open mind and your curiosity, and you will be well rewarded for having spent the time.

The first workshop in the monthly series will be offered on Saturday, Jan. 28, at Columbia Tai Chi Center, 2910 Rosewood Dr, Columbia, SC, from 1 to 4 pm, and is open to the general public, ages 15 and up (with parents' permission for under-age participants), and is suitable for the beginner and advanced alike. Space is limited, and this is a first-come, first-served event, so please register early.

Participants should wear loose, comfortable clothing (like a sweat suit or T-shirt and sweat pants) and comfortable shoes with non-marking soles (like tennis shoes).

Workshop tuition is \$80. Payment can be made during online registration. Cash payments must be made prior to the event to reserve your spot, or at the door the day of the event, if space is available. (Sorry, there will be no refunds under any circumstances unless the event is canceled by Columbia Tai Chi Center.)

Each workshop will feature a question-and-answer session and an open discussion, along with a review of the basics and new, detailed instruction.

For more info on the Qigong Workshop Series or how to register, visit SCQigong.com or ColumbiaTaiChiCenter.com.