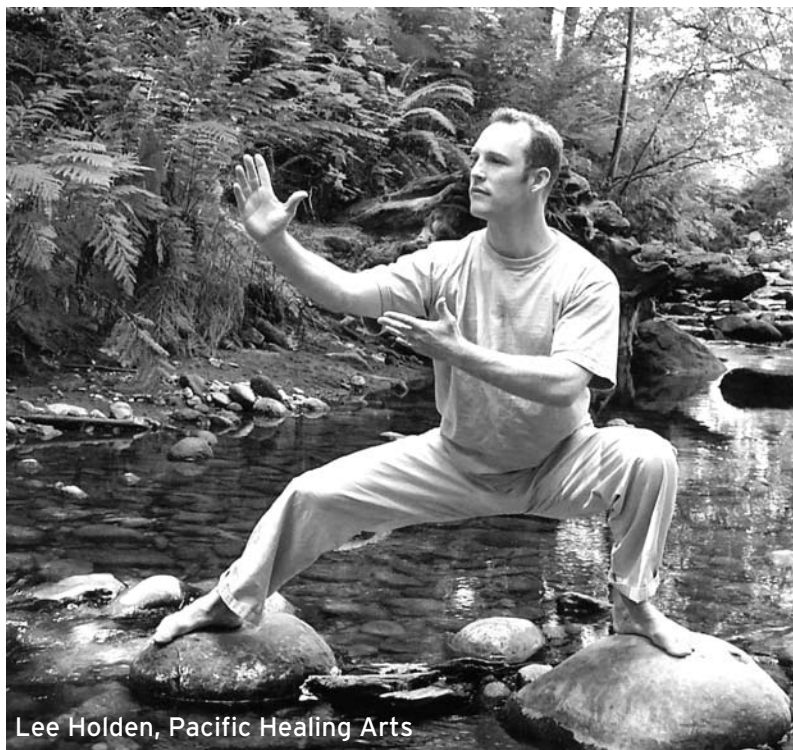


Exercises Most Ancient

by Mark Brophy

Qigong: *An ancient Chinese meditative practice using slow graceful movements and controlled breathing techniques to enhance health and promote the movement and balance of Qi energy within the body. Qigong is thought to be easy and accessible to everyone of every ability and is practiced in four to 20 moves or sets.*



Lee Holden, Pacific Healing Arts

With the New Year started, visions of resolutions dance in the minds of many people. Without a doubt, many will entertain the idea of beginning a new exercise regimen, either to address a specific health concern or for overall well-being. It might surprise some of them that many of the best and easiest exercises to learn are also some of the oldest ever recorded by man.

In December 1973, archeologists labored in the third tomb of a feudal family at Mawangdui, near the town of Changsha in the Hunan province of China. Inside, they uncovered a lacquer box that had been buried with a son of the King Ma, whose death was recorded in 168 BC, and which contained scrolls of bamboo and silk. Amongst these was a copy of Laozi's *Daode Jing*, along with 15 written manuscripts that outlined ancient health and longevity techniques. The most important finding was a scroll titled *Dao-yin Tu*, which contained 44 colored illustrations of human figures performing curative exercises, together with a brief description of the health benefits of each one. It is these earliest recorded exercises that are the foundation of what we now call *Qigong*. Those familiar with common Qigong routines such as *Ba Duan Jin* (Eight Piece Silk Brocade) or *Yi Jin Jing* (Bone Marrow Cleansing) would immediately identify many of the postures and poses on the *Dao-yin Tu* scroll.

Even without getting into the Chinese perspective, it is easy to see how any exercise focused on gentle exertion and stretching of the body can benefit overall health. Stretching and relaxation of the breath alone can engage the body's parasympathetic nervous system, the one that turns off the

negative effects of the body's stress response. When active, stress hormones, called glucocorticoids, suppress hunger, sexual drive and insulin production. During the reversal process, these responses are reduced, allowing the body's functions to return to normal. Exercise, particularly stretching, keeps muscles and ligaments supple and strong as well, which allows us to maintain mobility and physical abilities well into old age. "Use it or lose it" is ever so true when dealing with muscles and sinews.

Ancient Chinese scholars didn't have our modern knowledge of the endocrine system, but they did develop theories for homeostasis, or the body's healthy balance. One theory is based on the idea that the whole universe, and thus the body, is full of a vital energy called "qi" (pronounced "chee"), which is where we get the "Qi" in Qigong. This concept is not unique to China; in fact, many ancient and indigenous healing modalities from around the world make reference to it. What is interesting is how similar the central beliefs are, despite the fact that most of these people have never interacted.

The theory goes like this: When you are healthy, energy (qi) constantly moves throughout the body in a very balanced manner, like a gentle river. In healthy people, qi does not move violently, which would cause damage, nor does it move weakly, which would cause drought. Illnesses and physical maladies occur when the movement of qi is out of balance. Energy moves through the body in various patterns, including the well-defined acupuncture meridians; qi is to these meridians as water is to a garden hose. When there

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are energy blockages in the body, there is trouble, just as a kink in the hose prevents water running freely. In the body, a blockage means there is a buildup on one side, causing an unhealthy excess state, and a scarcity of qi on the other, reflected as a deficiency.

Gently moving and stretching the body in various ways allows us to smooth out the daily kinks and blockages that happen as a result of our lifestyle and cause these unhealthy imbalances of qi. This ancient idea of the body needing regular physical movement is even more applicable today, with our modern, hectic, static lifestyle. Long commutes to work, sitting at a desk, pc, or television for hours, or any other kind of inactivity can be more harmful than we realize. How many people do you know who were relatively healthy before they retired, only to develop health issues when they assumed an inactive retired lifestyle? Hypertension, for example, can often be lowered simply by the introduction of a daily constitutional walk.

The goals of Dao-yin exercises are to keep the muscles and ligaments healthy through movement, as well as to stimulate the flow of qi through the body in relation to organs and viscera. Stretching the arms, for example, not only strengthens muscles in the arms and shoulders, but aides energy flow through the heart, lung and intestines as well, according to traditional Chinese theory. This is the reason behind the very specific Qigong postures as well, which deliver these health benefits throughout the body. Of course, Dao-yin exercises are not found solely in Qigong; many can be found in the three sisters of the Chinese fighting arts, *Xing Yi Quan*, *Bagua Zhang* and one of the most famous Chinese arts of them all, *Tai Chi Ch'uan*.

Ancient Chinese scholar and physician Hua Tuo (AD 110-207) is often referred to as the "Father of Chinese Medicine." Hua once said: "The body should be exercised, but not to excess. Exercise improves digestions and keeps the meridians clear of obstructions. In this way, the body will remain free of illness. A door hinge does not rust if it is frequently used." Based on this advice, ancient sages practiced Dao-yin, and its practice can be seen at dawn every day throughout China to this day.

Dao-yin or Qigong can be an easy and effective way for people of all ages and health levels to introduce mild and beneficial exercises into their lives. Most movements can be done in the smallest of spaces, so dedicated workout facilities or additional accessories are not necessary. Many exercises take only a few minutes to complete, yet when practiced a few times a day bring great reward to the body, and with cumulative results. Qigong is very easy to learn, and there are many DVDs and books on the market to refer to. Still, a qualified and experienced instructor can help anyone, from beginner to expert, get the most benefit and enjoyment from the art of Dao-yin. Classes and workshops begin with the dawn of a New Year, and what better time to begin this age-old exercise regime for good health?

Mark Brophy is a freelance Qigong and Tai Chi instructor. For more info on classes and workshops, visit www.scqigong.com. See resource guide page 30.



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