

Qi Gong, Yi Quan and Tai Ji Quan


Qi gong, yi quan and tai ji quan are Internal Arts. This means they emphasize cultivation of internal energy or qi, a state of mental and emotional calm, and unity of body, mind and spirit. All these are factors in the achievement of good health.

Qi refers to the flow of energy in the body, the exchange between the body and the environment, and the flow of information within the body and with the environment. Among other meanings in Chinese, qi also means breath. Qi flows best when the body and mind are most relaxed. This tends to occur with slow, deep, abdominal or diaphragmatic breathing. Illness is said to be the result of blockage or stagnation of qi; when this occurs the blood too becomes stagnant, since the qi is the commander of the blood. Interestingly, when under stress, most people initially breathe higher in the chest and more shallowly, which hampers circulation. For many people that is their “normal” state.

Qi gong can be translated as “breath work” or “breathing exercise.” Gong means the effort or work leading to achievement of one's goal. Tai ji quan has been variously translated as "supreme ultimate fist", "boundless fist", "supreme ultimate boxing" or "great extremes boxing.”

Qi Gong and Tai Ji Quan are human physical manifestations of the Tao, the ebb and flow of nature: stillness and movement, softness and firmness, sensory awareness and response, Yin and Yang. Cultivation of breath, relaxation, balance and flexibility can lead to an increasing awareness of both our internal and the external environments and greater sensitivity and awareness.

Taoist and Confucian philosophies referred to wu ji, variously defined as “without ultimate” or “boundless beginning.” This was the primordial state of the universe. Out of this grew tai ji, the “supreme ultimate,” the fusion or mother of yin and yang, represented by the familiar tai ji tu symbol

. This symbol represents yin and yang, and points out that within each is a bit of the other. It is meant to convey as well a continuous movement and exchange between yin and yang, that they are complementary opposites, each needing the other and not existing in a static state.

There are various types of qi gong practice. My own training began with a specialized form of qi gong called yi quan. Yi Quan, “intention practice”, emphasizes cultivation of qi and awareness rather than the learning of techniques. This is achieved through standing practice, often called standing meditation, in Chinese zhan zhuang [a combination of “stand” and “pillar” or “foundation”]. The yi quan system uses a series of postures, standing with the arms raised in various positions, which at first can be quite physically demanding. As one learns to relax within the posture, what was difficult can become instead pleasurable. This leads to the development of sung, a relaxed and elastic state of the myofascial tissue, the muscles and tendons. This allows for a full, rather than empty feeling, but without tension or hardness, which in turn leads to an elasticity to one's body and postures.

In the words of one of my teachers, Sifu Fong Ha of Berkeley, Ca: “Through these deceptively simple practices, we integrate the mind with the body, we develop qi, we learn to focus our intention more precisely, and we strip our reflexive responses of all the excess baggage of learned techniques, preconceived notions, or unconscious habits of carriage, behavior, and self-arming picked up over a lifetime of hard knocks.” In the words of Wang Xiangzai, the developer of yi quan: “The goal of Yi quan is to concentrate the spirit and stabilize the mind. Find the natural, inborn abilities.”

Another form of qi gong, wu ji shi, developed and taught by another of my teachers, Cai Sang Fang, involves a more meditative type of standing, with arms at the sides and the focus on breathing in the dan tian, known as the “field of elixir,” below and behind the navel, the center of the body thought to be the area where qi is cultivated and from which it spreads throughout the body. Combined with the more demanding yi quan, wu ji shi allows practitioners to develop good alignment with gravity, deep

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relaxation, and an awareness of the fact that when still there is movement within. Combined with the practice of the movements of tai ji quan, one can thus develop a sense of movement within stillness and stillness within movement.

Tai ji quan is a series of continuous flowing movements, which initially grew out of the martial arts tradition in China in the 18th and 19th centuries. There are a number of styles of tai ji quan. In our time it is primarily practiced for its health benefits, many of which have been documented by modern research. These include lowering of blood pressure, improved balance and flexibility, moderate cardiovascular benefits, etc. Yang Chengfu, the founder of the Yang style of tai ji quan stated: “The movement is in the body, but the influence reaches the spirit...without long practice, it is difficult to achieve the highest level...if we speak only of the science of health, then one day's effort produces one day's benefit, and one year, one year's results.” In other words, each day one practices one gains benefits, but there can be continual growth, deepening and refining of one's practice with tai ji.

Yang Chengfu was an unrivaled martial artist, and one of his “secret” practices was thought to be the wu ji shi qi gong. The use of tai ji quan and yi quan as martial arts requires a great deal of training and diligent practice. This can lead to internal strength, as opposed to external strength. This has to do with learning how to shift one's weight, use one's central equilibrium, and expand the body in every direction as if a sphere. In tai ji we practice push hands or sticky hands, which is partnered exercises. These teach us to be sensitive to the energy of others and help us unlearn habits and reflexes that can hinder us. Thus push hands is enjoyable and has great value aside from any martial side. Rather than emphasizing particular techniques, tai ji and yi quan emphasize enhancing sensitivity and awareness, which along with internal strength allow one to respond to whatever comes one's way. This can be understood to mean on many levels, not just the physical.

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