

The Qigong Getaway

Sequences for Life

BY SUSAN DAWSON-COOK

You are about to embark on a revitalizing escape. The Qigong (pronounced “chee gung”) vacation doesn’t require that you pack a suitcase or purchase an airline ticket. It costs nothing and can take place in an exercise studio, your home or your backyard. It is totally up to you. All that you need is your body and your breath. Instead of boarding a crowded aircraft, you take flight merely by breathing. You stand with your joints and muscles comfortably relaxed, feeling your belly expand and contract with each breath.

As you begin this gentle practice of moving, breathing and meditation, you are transported to a new place where you feel calm, at peace and totally at ease with yourself. The tension and stress that once made your muscles feel restricted and uncomfortable begin to melt into the ground beneath your feet. Your forehead relaxes, the tension in your shoulders dissipates and there is no more tightness in your belly. Contentment washes over you like a spring rain. The pores of your skin radiate the inner calm you feel. You aren’t thinking about what you will do next or what you should have done yesterday. Your mind is content in the here and now. Your Qigong vacation has begun.

Chinese shamans, Taoists and Buddhists developed this spiritual discipline of Qigong, which Chinese archaeologists and historians proclaim has been practiced for more than 5,000 years. Sketches of people imitating graceful movements of animals such as the bear, eagle and snake, inscribed on stone walls and tablets, jade pieces and even silk,

serve as Qigong’s earliest records.

Qigong is practiced worldwide today. Health educator, author and Qigong Master, Ken Cohen, founded the Academy of Chinese Healing Arts in 1976. Nestled in the Colorado Rockies is Cohen’s Taoist mountain retreat and Qigong Research and Practice Center, where many Qigong instructors are taught.

Qigong is the practice of working with “qi” (life energy) to improve health and sense of well-being. The body is a complex energy system, driven by “qi.” “Qi” is the electromagnetic force field that surrounds the body and the electrical energy that controls growth, repair and nutrient exchange on the cellular level. When normal cellular functions are disrupted by pollution, a poor diet and/or stress, “qi” can be depleted, leading to declining health. The Qigong practice of gentle movement, breathing and meditating is touted to cleanse, circulate and strengthen the life energy in the body to restore optimal health.

There are three major kinds of Qigong: spiritual, martial (or sports, using a term coined by Ken Cohen) and healing. A popular form of sports Qigong is Tai Chi, a slow-motion martial art that may be practiced for health. Another widely practiced discipline, and the focus of this article, is personal healing Qigong. There are thousands of different styles of Qigong within these major disciplines, enough to keep a practitioner busy learning for a lifetime. Many Qigong styles are named for their benefit to the body, such as Bone Marrow Cleansing Qigong

and Healing Sounds Qigong. Movements of animals such as the crane, bear, monkey and tiger are the foundation of the Five Animal Frolics and other styles.

Instructors can choose from a smorgasbord of Qigong movements and meditative activities when creating workouts, depending on what they wish to accomplish. A sequence of three processes of qi work typically takes place. Classes open with exercises designed to cleanse the qi of toxins. Next, movements are done to gather up a reservoir of qi so it can later be circulated to stagnant or diseased parts of the body.

Experienced Qigong participants develop a keen sense of energy concentration in their bodies and know what exercises will facilitate optimal balance. They also learn to regulate unhealthy tension that may elevate heart rate, blood pressure and the release of stress hormones.

Qigong has been shown to be an effective adjunct to medical treatment of chronic pain, asthma, arthritis, diabetes, headaches, gastrointestinal disorders, chronic fatigue and even cancer and heart disease. In addition to better health, many people who practice Qigong report increased energy, better sleep, improved self-awareness and concentration, improved respiration, favorable changes in blood chemistry, and improved posture.

The Stance

The basic Qigong stance is very relaxed, standing posture with the feet hip-width apart and parallel, knees soft, shoulders relaxed, spine long, belly relaxed, and the

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arms hanging loosely alongside the body. If a medical condition makes it uncomfortable to stand for long periods of time, a seated position may be adopted.

Qigong can teach people “how to walk with more ease,” said Cohen. “Many people stand with locked knees. The knees are the body’s shock absorbers. If they are walking on a hard, unyielding surface like concrete or standing or waiting in line, there is a tremendous stress put on the lower back.”

He often has students place a palm on their sacrum, their fingertips on the tailbone so they can feel the difference in how the lower vertebrae move as they walk in a lock-kneed versus a relaxed knee position. When the knees are bent, there is much more shifting in the vertebrae, which allows the back to accommodate the stress of the movement.

Breathing

The belly expands with inhalation and contracts with exhalation, drawing air deep into the body. Qigong breathing is much different than the rapid, shallow breathing that most people are accustomed to. “In order to get enough oxygen, you have to take more breaths per minute to get the same amount of oxygen,” said Cohen. When an oxygen deficit occurs, the pH of the blood is altered, less oxygen is released into the cells and a person eventually feels energy depleted.

Getting in Tune With the Body

Before beginning any movements, Cohen recommends a five minute standing meditation “to tune into the body and find out where the stress is.”

SAMPLE SEQUENCE

The Eight Brocades Style of Qigong

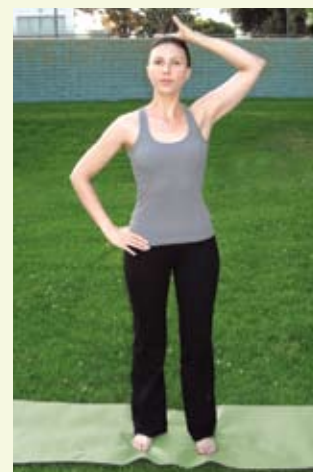
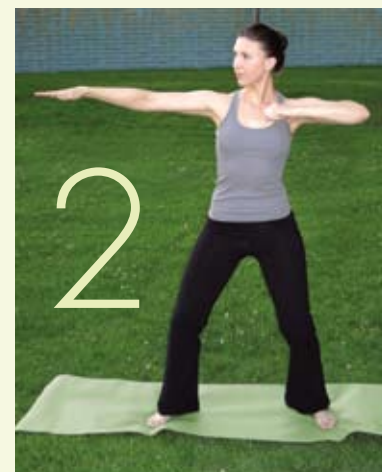
Ba Duan Jin, which means eight pieces of silk brocade, were initially recorded in an eighth century Daoist text, *Xiu Zhen Shi Shu: The Ten Treatises on Restoring the Original Vitality*. This series of eight exercises is designed to circulate qi, stretch muscles and massage the internal organs.

1. Two hands reach skyward to balance energy flow

Interlace the fingers and place them palms down on the crown of the head. As you inhale, stretch the arms upward, rising on the toes. Then exhale and bring the palms back onto the crown of the head, bringing heels to the ground. On the next repetition, as you rise on the toes, push palms upward as you lengthen the arms. Repeat 10 times, alternating the direction of the palms each time.

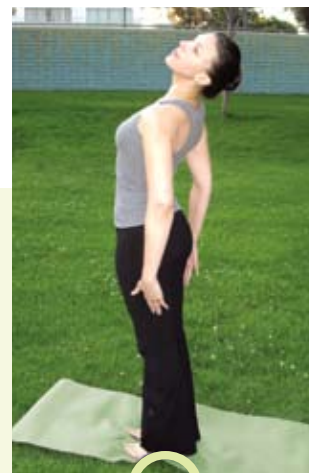
2. Open the bow as though shooting the buzzard

Step out into a horse stance, feet turned slightly outward, knees bent. Roll fists inward at chest height so the backs of the hands touch. Inhale as you pull one fist back toward the shoulder, extending the other arm parallel to the ground, palm down. Exhale as you close both hands back into fists and bring them back together. Repeat on other side, doing a total of 9 or 10 repetitions per side.



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3. Raise each arm to regulate the spleen

In Qigong stance, place the back of right hand on top of the crown of the head and left hand on the side of the rib cage. Exhale, pushing right hand up toward the sky and left hand down toward earth, circling arms out to the side of the body until the position is reversed. Reverse. Do 9 or 10 sets per side.

4. Looking behind to cure fatigue and stress

With arms at the side of the body, palms facing downward and fingers pointed away from the body, slowly turn head from side to side, looking in the direction the head is facing or slightly behind the shoulder. Do 9 or 10 sets per side.

5. Bending over, wagging the tail to calm heart fire

From a wide, deep horse stance, rest hands on thighs with thumbs pointing back. Inhale, lengthening through spine. Exhale, tilting the body over the right thigh and then slowly swinging the

body forward and around like a pendulum, returning to an upright, straight-backed position. Do this 9 or 10 times on each side.

6. Reaching down to dissipate disease

In Qigong stance, place hands on the buttocks. Inhale and then as you exhale, bend forward as your hands slide down the backs of the legs. Inhale on your way up. Repeat up to 10 times.

7. Punching with intense gaze

Stand with feet three feet apart, knees slightly bent. Elbows are pulled back, hands in loose fists, palms facing in. Keeping an intense gaze, punch slowly forward with right fist, rotating the hand inward as the arm extends. Avoid locking elbows. Draw back extended arm and punch with left arm. Do this 9 or 10 times per side.

8. Toe touching to strengthen kidneys and waist

In Qigong stance, exhale and slowly bend forward as far toward the toes as you can go. Once you have reached

your lowest point, hold the position and breathe for a few moments. From the bent over position, slowly raise back to standing, one vertebra at a time. Continue past starting position, bowing back slightly. Hold this position, feeling the openness, this time in the front of the body. Do this up to 10 times.

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Freelance writer **Susan Dawson-Cook** has an MS from the University of Arizona and is a contributing editor for *American Fitness*. She has been an AFAA certified fitness professional for more than 17 years. Dawson-Cook's passion for geology, health and fitness, and adventure travel serve as her inspiration for writing.

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