

Real Common Sense

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Benefits of Qigong (Chi Kung) and Taijiquan (Tai Chi Chuan)

Hello, this is Dr. Ellen. For many years, I have done and advocated for regular physical exercise including aerobic and resistance training. In this month's *'Real Common Sense'* newsletter, I want to write about another 'genre' of exercises that I have been exploring. I have found many more studies than I expected, supporting the health benefits of these exercises. I am talking about qigong, taijiquan, and other forms of practices that have been referred to as 'internal' arts. In fact, the term 'neigong', which refers to 'inner skill', was used long before the term 'qigong'.

By the way, if you didn't get a chance to see my previous newsletters, you can find them on my new website, www.drellencutler.com under 'Media'.

What is Qigong?

Qigong is made up of two words. 'Qi' in general refers to energy and has different definitions in different contexts. In the context of the word qigong, 'qi' can mean subtle breath or vital energy. 'Gong' means the cultivation of a skill or skills, or the competency in that skill set, derived through steady practice. Qigong can be described as a mind-body-spirit practice done to improve one's physical, mental/ emotional, and spiritual health. There are hundreds if not thousands of qigong styles, schools, and traditions, each with its own theories on how to practice.⁽¹⁾

There are two major categories of qigong. Waigong (wei gong) refers to 'outer skills'. These qigong practices are more akin to those used in training by western athletes. They focus on muscular strengthening, soft tissue stretching, and cardiovascular exercises. These skills are usually objectively measurable and can be health-promoting; they are somewhat similar to conventional western training programs. Waigong may also refer to training such 'external' skills as 'iron hand' and 'iron body'.⁽²⁾

Neigong describes those qigong practices that help to develop 'inner skills'. It is the neigong practices that are the other genre of exercises I have been exploring and will be addressing here. Many of them integrate posture and soft, slow movement with breathing techniques and focused intent, oftentimes concentrating on inner energy (Qi). The focused awareness on energy can be utilized during movement as well as seated or standing meditation exercises. Neigong aims to improve one's health by enhancing the functioning of the internal organs

and/or improving the sense of vitality and clarity of one's individual experiences. Thus, the development of these 'skills' is largely subjective.^(1,2)

What is Taijiquan?

The word taijiquan is composed of three words. The word 'tai' means "supreme", 'ji' (or chi) refers to "boundary", and 'quan' (chuan) means "fist" or "movement", as in boxing. Together, the term "taijiquan" implies a method of movement to cultivate a form of power that has no boundary. Oftentimes, taijiquan is simply translated 'supreme, ultimate fist'. Taijiquan seems to have developed from previous forms of health-promoting exercises, which could have today been considered as forms of qigong, that were combined with martial and military methods. The first style of taijiquan was created in the Chen village and was named after that village, which had its name because of the Chen family. From that, it is thought that today's most well-known style arose, the Yang style, and from Yang style arose the Wu style. Several other styles are also practiced today.⁽³⁾

Successful practice depends upon cultivating several skills. One such skill is learning to smoothly transition the 'yin/yang' aspects when doing each form; for example, as weight shifts away from one leg (becoming yin), the other side receives the added weight (becoming yang). Another skill involves sensing one's whole-body movements; this leads to using the whole body to generate power. These and other skills are also employed and extended during partner practice.⁽³⁾

Practitioners of taijiquan seem to be divided about the connection between taijiquan and qigong. Traditionally, taijiquan has been considered to be an internal martial art, and qigong can be used to support one's practice. However, today many practice taijiquan primarily or exclusively as a form of qigong for improved health and wellness, often referring to it as Tai Chi.

What are the Benefits of Qigong and Taijiquan?

In a major review published in 2010,⁽⁴⁾ six areas of health benefits of qigong and/or taijiquan were found to have been addressed, each by at least 16 randomized controlled trials (RCTs). These were improvements in psychological parameters, falls and related risk factors, cardiopulmonary fitness, quality of life, patient reported outcomes, and physical function. Three other areas of health benefits were addressed by 8 or fewer RCTs, namely, bone density, self-efficacy, and studies examining markers of immune function or inflammation. Most of the trials showed significant, positive results in these 9 areas of tested health benefits, especially when compared to minimally active or inactive controls. Those trials that did not find significant improvements with taijiquan or qigong intervention occurred in studies in which the control group was doing/receiving a treatment expected to produce benefits. In most of these cases, substantial improvements in the outcome were observed for both treatment groups.

In a review from 2016, the strongest evidence of benefits with taijiquan was in preventing falls in older adults, osteoarthritis, Parkinson’s disease, rehabilitation of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, improving cognitive capacity, and improving balance and aerobic capacity.⁽⁵⁾ Many studies have found significant benefits in other chronic conditions, including in those suffering from multiple sclerosis;⁽⁶⁾ osteoarthritis, low back pain, and fibromyalgia;⁽⁷⁾ hypertension;⁽⁸⁾ depression;⁽⁹⁾ and likely stress and anxiety.⁽¹⁰⁾ Of significant note, in as little as 4 weeks of practice, practitioners have been found to enhance their immune system function and the regulation of their inflammatory response.⁽¹¹⁾

How are the Benefits of Internal Arts Achieved?

Some postulated aspects of the internal arts that lead to beneficial changes include meditative (such as the relaxation response and enhanced awareness of the body and its environment), ‘energetic’ (including stimulation of meridians through mental intent and movement), and physical (including increased flexibility, joint stimulation, positive respiratory effects, and glandular stimulation).⁽¹²⁾ Although generally slow movements are emphasized, the exercises are nonetheless of moderate intensity.⁽¹³⁾ However, it has been proposed that these exercises are different from conventional aerobic and anaerobic exercises. One small study found a significant increase in blood-oxygen saturation during tai chi practice. This compares favorably to other forms of exercise – there was no change with walking and a drop in blood-oxygen saturation during cycling and running.⁽¹⁴⁾

Using the Ellen Cutler Method (ECM)

I have been able to identify an individual’s optimal lifestyle modifications, including which internal arts practice would be best, by using the Ellen Cutler Method (ECM) of energetic testing. However, the best advice in general is to choose a practice that you enjoy doing and would want to perform on a regular basis. Also, before starting, check with your healthcare professional to make sure there are no problems doing that particular practice.

So, be well, be healthy, and remember...

“Treat your mind by moving your body [and] treat your body by stilling your mind.”

— Mark Melchiorre

Dr. Ellen

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