



ALTERNATIVE THERAPIES

Information on complementary treatments

By ANGETTE RICE-FIGUEROA

If you're ready to explore a complementary exercise therapy and need to keep it in low gear, consider giving qigong (pronounced chee-gung) a try.

Proponents of qigong say the practice has done everything from relieve pain to cure cancer. Although the benefits have been studied in China for decades, no scientifically organized clinical trials exist to back up the claims in Europe or the United States. Whether or not it miraculously prevents or cures any diseases, it can certainly improve general fitness and well-being. And since exercises can easily be adapted to one's own physical capabilities—and can be performed while walking, standing, sitting in a wheelchair or lying down—qigong movements could be ideal for PWCs.

In the practice of Chinese medicine, chi (pronounced chee) is the universal life force or life energy that circulates throughout the body along invisible energy channels

called meridians. Illness is said to result from an imbalance of chi, and that the slow and meditative movements of qigong restore balance and resume a healthy flow to distressed parts of the body. A collective term for many energy arts that seek to stimulate the flow of chi, qigong has been practiced by millions of Chinese for at least 2,000 years.

According to Kim Ivy, a certified tai chi and qigong instructor and owner of Embrace the Moon School in Seattle, Washington, qigong can be good for chronic pain sufferers because of the slowness of the exercises, which take the body very gently through a range of motions without engaging a strong muscle contraction.

Ivy was introduced to qigong for her own rehabilitation following a 1988 car accident. Since 1990 she has taught the practice to many clients with chronic pain ranging from simple age-related aches and pains to more debilitating conditions such as CFIDS, fibromyalgia and

cancer. Ivy quickly learned that traditional methods of teaching qigong and tai chi, such as holding postures, deep bending and long sessions without breaks were unacceptable for her chronic pain clients and, without exception, caused those students a significant increase in symptoms.

“With a great deal of collaborative experimentation, my chronic pain students and I discovered a host of training and teaching methods that proved successful,” says Ivy. “Each method is based on the core principle of qigong: mind intent leads energy, energy leads movement.”

To understand this principle in everyday life, Ivy suggests you think of being hungry. The sensation of hunger leads to the thought of going to the refrigerator (mind intent). The thought of going to the refrigerator leads to the impetus to get up (energy), and the impetus to rise off the chair fuels the action of going to the refrigerator (movement).



People of all sizes, shapes and ages practice qigong and tai chi at Kim Ivy's Embrace the Moon School in Seattle.



Author and qigong instructor Kim Ivy works with both men and women with chronic illnesses to help them experience the benefits of qigong.

Qigong-type movement works the same way. A student thinks about the movement (visualization), over time the energy of the body will follow the thought and eventually will propel the physical body.

Ivy believes this process is very important to understand when living in and trying to heal a body that isn't working as you want it to. Many of her students have significant breakthroughs in healing by following this practice course. One success story is PWC Candace Sanders, a previously thin, muscular athlete and landscaper in her early fifties who never recovered from a case of the flu. She came to Ivy's class 50 pounds overweight and all but bedridden.

Candace began an eight-week tai chi/qigong course Ivy had designed for a local hospital's pain clinic. The class met for 90 minutes twice a week. Initially, she was unable to stand for more than a few minutes without her heart rate exceeding 200 beats per minute. During the course of the eight weeks, Candace would follow the movements as well as she could and lay down to rest every two minutes. During the rest time, she would watch very intently, imprinting the simple arm, waist and leg patterns into her brain. When watching became too fatiguing, she would close her eyes and follow the voice instructions. During the course, Candace became skilled at visualizing the movements and would practice them mentally at home. Within four weeks, she was standing and practicing with the group for at least half of the class.

Candace continued to develop her tai chi and qigong skills using this process, and over the next four years became a top student and eventually an assistant instructor. Candace's suffering had not been obliterated, and she didn't rely solely on qigong and tai chi for her improved health, but they were instrumental in helping symptoms recede, boosting her quality of life.

"To me it's important to understand that the physical body is not the beginning or the end of the healing process," says Ivy. "If we as students and teachers can be patient and disciplined enough to cultivate the mental and energetic aspects of our practice, the body will improve. I have had the privilege of working with many students like Candace, and together we've found this process to be a key that unlocks dramatic possibilities for healing physically, emotionally and spiritually." ■

HOW TO FIND A GOOD QIGONG TEACHER

Although many books and videos are available to study qigong on your own, it's useful to have the expertise of someone who can show you how to "feel" the correct movement and energy flow. Though gentle, the forms of movement are physically based and, if you do them incorrectly, you can be injured.

Qigong is still relatively new on the exercise landscape in America, and it's still not commonly recognized as an alternative therapy for chronic illnesses. Finding the right qigong teacher can be a challenge, but with patience and persistence, it's possible to add a great teacher to your group of healing allies. Because certification programs are rare and those that do exist are idiosyncratic and don't fall under any authority, Ivy offers the following guidelines for finding a great qigong instructor:

1 Look for the teacher's heart and style. Avoid rigid teachers who insist that theirs is the only form, that it cannot be modified and that you must practice it their way. Find a teacher who is flexible and willing to listen to your needs and limits. The teacher must be willing to explore modifying the form for your comfort.

2 Work with a teacher who has been practicing qigong for several years. This is more important than finding a teacher with impressive certifications. The teacher you find should have a good sense of both energy and physical alignment. Alignment is often not emphasized in qigong, but it's especially important for those with chronic pain.

3 Find an instructional environment that works for you. You should want to come to class. Classes should be noncompetitive, friendly and fun. Also, if necessary, remind your teacher that fragrances should be a no-no in classes.

4 Follow your intuition. Give yourself all the time you need to research your options, experience a few classes, then sit for a few days with the experience to learn how your body responded to it. Qigong's popularity will continue to increase, and you can be instrumental in shaping the teachers who work with those with chronic health conditions.