

Qigong:

Sense, Common Sense and Nonsense



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Yiheyuan Martial Arts

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What is Qigong?

Qigong systems have probably been around for thousands of years, as evidenced by the recent discovery (during the seventies) of drawings depicting the Five Animal Frolics Qigong in a Chinese tomb believed to be over two thousand years old.

There are many theories and ideas about what qigong is and how it works. "Qigong" (sometimes written as Qi Gong, Chi Gung or Chi Kung) can be translated as "breath work" or "energy work" since it involves the conscious manipulation of the "life force" or "cosmic breath" known as Qi or Chi (or Ki in Japanese) which, according to Traditional Chinese Medicine, not only animates the body of every living creature but also flows through the body via certain pathways or "meridians".

There may be thousands of different types of qigong; some practiced for healing, some for fitness and general well-being, some for conditioning the body for martial arts.

They fall roughly into the following categories:

- *STATIONARY POSTURES* or *Zhang Zhong* (Pronounced Jang Jong).
- *UPPER BODY ROUTINES* or sets performed while standing in one place. Eg. *The Eighteen "Tai Chi" Qigong* and the famous *Eight Pieces of Brocade* or *Ba Duan Jin*.
- *SEQUENCES* which involve moving around, such as Tai Chi and *Dayan Wild Goose Qigong*.
- *NEI GONG* or "Iron Shirt" techniques used in martial arts training.
- *SENSING AND TRANSMISSION OF CHI* to others in order to restore balance and bring about healing.

We will explore this ancient art from various perspectives in order to gain a broad overview and allow you to discover which aspects interest you the most, perhaps providing a basis for your further studies.

This account may well be slightly controversial, not through any deliberate intent but simply because the whole field of Qigong is itself so fraught with controversy that any attempt to write a balanced account, reflecting the diverse range of viewpoints on the subject, is bound to ruffle a few feathers in one camp or another.

As a scientist, I will approach the subject with, I hope, a fair degree of objectivity, while at the same time giving due consideration to aspects which may, as yet, lack a solid experimental basis.

In my experience, people seeking to study and practice Qigong generally approach it through one or more of these four routes:

1. To improve their physical health
2. To reduce stress and regain or maintain their emotional and mental well-being.
3. To improve their skills in martial arts
4. To find meaning and purpose in their lives

Therefore, although there is considerable overlap between the different aspects of Qigong, I have broadly divided the field into four areas: Physical, Mental, Martial and Spiritual.

In each section, I will point out what I personally perceive to be the potential positive benefits of Qigong, though I have no vested interest in over-glorifying it or making wild claims about its efficacy and therefore, if appropriate, I will also mention any potentially harmful or weird stuff that I would personally recommend that you avoid.

Whatever prompted you to take an interest in Qigong, it may well be that you find what you are looking for and, with an eyes-open approach, you should be able to enjoy a fascinating journey into this ancient art.

Qigong for Health

Qigong and Physical Health – A Standard Medical Explanation

Of all the benefits attributed to Qigong, the health benefits are in some ways the most obvious and straightforward. Leaving aside any of the more exotic explanations for the moment; as sequences or sets of exercises, often performed slowly and mostly physiologically sound, they can encourage otherwise inactive people to get moving and start enjoying the known and widely proven benefits of a more active lifestyle, such as improvements in strength, stamina, flexibility, co-ordination, balance, circulation, bone-density and lung capacity, all of which can help to provide an overall experience of increased well-being.

The same might be said of a daily walk around the block, but Qigong exercises have added advantages in that:

- they can be performed indoors, in privacy, and in a very small space,
- they stretch and work specific parts of the body as well as providing an overall workout,
- when performed in a class or group setting, they can have added social benefits,
- they can provide an excellent warm up prior to that walk around the block!

Some Qigong sets may be very suitable for older people or anyone recovering from illness or injury. Some may be fun for children to do in school as part of their PE lessons. Others may be physically quite challenging and require a certain level of fitness and flexibility before embarking on them. Some may require considerable practice and expert guidance in order to master them, notably the Nei Gong exercises used in martial arts training systems.

There are many different Qigong exercises and it is important to look for those which best suit your own needs and capabilities.

What to Avoid

Any Qigong exercises which break UK best practice with regard to health and safety, such as anything which involves twisting the knees in unnatural ways (eg. circling them) or putting excessive strain on the neck, lower back or pelvic floor.

For example, the Yi Ching Jing, also known as the Muscle Tendon Changing Classic, can be very extreme (especially if performed wrongly or over-enthusiastically) and is particularly unsuitable for older people or anyone with back problems or unaccustomed to a fairly demanding regular exercise regime. Please beware of the current wave of teachers (often with seemingly impressive credentials) claiming that this is ideal exercise for the elderly.

Qigong and Physical Health – The "Energy" Explanation

In addition to the obvious physical benefits of any safe form of exercise, there are various other theories of how Qigong brings about improved physical well-being. Many Qigong practitioners believe that improvements in health are a result of rebalancing the flow of energy or Chi (Qi) through the body's meridians or energy channels.

Illness is thought to be a result of blockages or other imbalances in the chi flow, therefore Acupuncturists attempt to unblock them – by the insertion of needles into the body, or by the application of heat or pressure – in order to allow the chi to flow more freely.

It is also widely believed that this flow can be directed within one's own body, and possibly the bodies of others, by the conscious will. This clearly has parallels with various other disciplines and practices, such as Reiki healing, the "laying on of hands" and the direction of the flow of "Prana" through the chakra centres in Kundalini Yoga.

What to Avoid

Any stuff about how you can seriously damage yourself by directing your chi in the wrong way. Some Qigong "masters" are really into this as a scare story and claim that you need to be trained for many years and shouldn't practice unsupervised in case you injure yourself by causing disturbances in your chi.

Whether or not you are happy to pay vast sums of money for this kind supervision, look at it this way – if you can move energy down your arm by stroking it with your other hand, and this can be done wrongly without expert guidance, then presumably you risk the direst consequences every time you have an unsupervised bath or shower and wash a potentially vulnerable limb!

If it is also possible to injure yourself by standing for a few minutes a day in Zhang Zhong posture (over and above getting a bit of back ache from leaning instead of standing up straight) then it must be very dangerous to stand around at a bus stop for more than five minutes! (Perhaps transport planners need to know this as an urgent incentive for keeping trains and buses running on time.) Personally, I would consider that you are in more danger from passing traffic and muggers than from anything you could inadvertently do to yourself by standing still.

The Psychology of Healing

As a qualified Psychotherapist, I feel that we have yet to fully appreciate the capacity of the human mind to enable the body to heal itself. I have considered this for many years and it seems to me that there are certain key ingredients involved in a successful healing – and this applies as much to conventional medicine as to "alternative" or "complementary" practices such as Qigong. In a nutshell:

If you believe it's good for you, it more than likely will be.

More specifically, key ingredients appear to be:

- Attention
- Expectation
- Intention

If you *intend* to get better, you *expect* to get better, you *believe* that you *will* get better and you focus all of your *attention* on getting better, the likelihood is that you will at least increase the probability that you will get better. This is as good a definition of “Faith Healing” as I can think of!

If, on the other hand, you have ever phoned in sick when you were not really all that ill, you may have discovered how a few hours of seriously playing the role of a suffering victim, in order to assuage the guilt of skiving off work, can make you feel genuinely awful and thus help to justify your absence and ease your conscience!

Interestingly, if your predominant thoughts are of fighting this terrible illness, your attention is largely focused on the illness rather than recovery and therefore this may be a less effective strategy than visualizing yourself as healed and well. (In the same way that focusing on getting out of *debt*, losing *weight*, stopping *smoking*, and going on a *diet* can keep you focused on debt, weight, smoking and food, creating more of these in your life, while switching to language including the words *wealth*, *health*, *clean air* and *fitness*, can have a transforming effect on your life. In essence:

What you put your attention on tends to grow and become your reality.

This is an accepted principle in the field of psychotherapy where simple stories are often used to create powerful positive expectations, using the capacity of the right hemisphere of the brain to respond at a deep level to metaphors. More surprisingly perhaps, the power of expectation was given a lot of credence by quantum physicists, who observed that the outcome of an experiment is influenced by the presence and expectations of an observer. Remember this next time you have an argument with a photocopier!

A positive outlook can have a direct effect on your immune system and possibly other bodily functions. For example, many of you may have seen the TV series in which a female doctor investigated alternative therapies and came across a case in which dozens of people went into hospital for a knee operation. Half of them actually had the operation, the other half had an incision made and later duly stitched up but, unbeknown to them, no actual repairs were done to their knees. Both groups subsequently enjoyed an equal degree of recovery from their original knee problems¹. This was a fine example of the placebo effect, which has been known to be an effective method of healing for millennia. This doesn't mean that it's all trickery, but surely it calls for a reappraisal of how the human mind can influence physiological processes.

It is also clear from this that doctors and other health professionals need to be very careful about the language they use with their clients. The phrase: "Only about one in fifty people suffering from this condition actually die from it," may seem to be saying the same thing as: "Ninety-eight percent of people with this condition make a full recovery," but the effect of these words on a patient can be vastly different. The first phrase leaves the words "suffering" and "die" resounding in the mind while the other creates the expectation of a "full recovery".

For Qigong practitioners worldwide, the benefits they gain from it are very likely to be directly proportional to their belief that it is good for them, so whether or not we personally believe in a mysterious energy called chi, let's not knock it as a method of healing.

What to avoid

To be charitable in my interpretation of their behaviour, some people appear to like to increase the expectation of the efficacy of their services by the prices they charge for them. After all, if it costs about ten thousand pounds to learn a sequence of half a dozen simple movements, which you study at different "levels" in a series of seminars, then obviously it must be good stuff, mustn't it? Or might it have been equally effective if it had cost you fifty quid?

Does this sound a bit cynical? If expectations etc are so powerful, why don't I focus exclusively on the amazing power of Qigong to bring about miracle healings? Or on the amazing gurus who facilitate such miracles and must therefore be revered and respected?

Well because most "gurus" tend to turn out to be very dodgy in one way or another. It's remarkable how many of them had their mysterious skills transmitted to them telepathically by long-deceased masters or aliens, for example. Other remarkable qualities they appear to share include the size of their bank balances and the flocks of unquestioning adherents who happily contribute to their opulent lifestyle.

I encourage my own students to keep their feet firmly on the ground and question everything that I or others tell them; while I in turn endeavour to keep a reasonably open mind, study as widely as possible and share any new discoveries I make as topics for discussion and debate.

Yes, I do believe there can be miracles, things I can't yet quite explain and which cause me to look on in awe and simply be thankful. To me the universe itself is a miracle. I have never understood why people need exotic events that defy the laws of nature when those very laws, and life itself, are the greatest miracles of all; though I daresay we haven't discovered them all yet – which is probably just as well because we can still enjoy the process of exploration and discovery that is one of the great joys of life.

Qigong and Mental Health and Well Being

Recent research in the field of psychology has found that regular exercise is as at least as effective as medication in lifting depression. Possible reasons for this include:

- The production of endorphins² (natural opiates) during exercise, which can give rise to feelings of well-being and a reduction in the perception of pain.
- Improved self-esteem, when you get up off the couch and go for a run rather than having a cigarette/beer/valium/bar of chocolate.
- Improvements in health, better sleeping patterns and possible opportunities to increase one's social network by encountering fellow movement-enthusiasts.

Overall, Qigong can provide all these benefits as well as a tranquil, relaxed state of mind and body, which helps to reduce stress levels and any associated anxiety-induced physical symptoms.

In addition, the “spiritual” aspects of Qigong can provide meaning and purpose in people’s lives, meeting basic human emotional needs

What to Avoid

Avoid people who tell you that their Chi has taken over their body. This is not Qigong, it is a symptom of psychosis. In Qigong, the first principle is that the Yi (mind) leads the Chi (energy), not the other way round, and nobody else can mess with your Chi. Whether Chi is a real substance or a mentally generated experience, it is directed by your own conscious will and therefore under your own control at all times.

Those who are interested in the nature of psychosis and some new and very successful methods of treatment might like to explore the Human Givens Institute website³.

Chi: Does it exist and, if so, what is it?

The following are my personal thoughts on the subject of Chi, at this present time. Like all opinions, these are open to change in the light of further scientific evidence, one way or the other.

I will consider the possible nature of Chi, and the likelihood of its existence, from various angles:

- as a biochemistry graduate,
- as a psychotherapist,
- as a student of theoretical physics,
- as a practitioner and teacher of Tai Chi Chuan and Qigong, and
- from my own personal experience.

As a biochemist, I have studied, in minute detail, the structure and composition of cells and their interrelationships with each other. The human body is often depicted as a kind of bag of separate bits, held up by the skeleton and held together by skin, with nerves, blood vessels, muscles and the like all doing their independent jobs, like the plumbing and electrical systems of a house.

However, living systems are not like that. If you have ever really looked at a piece of meat, you will have noticed how everything is so tightly bound together that it is quite tricky to separate one bit from another. There are connective tissues holding everything together, allowing intimate connections between different cells and systems.

Every cell is in constant communication with its neighbours and with the body as a whole, in a variety of ways, from chemical or hormonal signals to electrical impulses and the contraction of tiny microfilaments within and between cells. All of these processes involve energy which, when not in use, can be stored as high-energy bonds in molecules such as adenosine triphosphate (ATP).

It is even possible that quantum field effects occur. For example, it has been suggested that virtual photons in the membranes of brain cells may allow the brain to behave as a Bose-Einstein condensate, which is one theory of the basis of human thought⁴.

It is a long-established fact that thoughts in the mind can have physical effects on the body. For example, the "fight or flight" response allows a single scary thought to bring about profound physiological changes throughout the body within seconds, via hormones such as adrenaline. From a pounding heart and rapid breathing to sweaty palms and a lurch in your tummy, you will undoubtedly have noticed this effect yourself.

In biofeedback experiments, subjects have routinely brought about measurable changes in their physiological functions, such as altered skin temperature or blood pressure⁵. In other experiments, intense stress has been shown to have an adverse effect on the body's immune system, while a positive attitude and sense of humour tend to boost its effectiveness⁶.

With all of the above in mind, perhaps it is not inconceivable that energy, or a physical sensation that feels like energy, could be passed from cell to cell in a coordinated manner throughout the body, under the influence of conscious intent.

As a Psychotherapist, trained in clinical hypnotherapy, I am aware that the thought of warmth, coolness or tingling sensations passing through the body can give rise to the actual experience of such phenomena. (The Yi leads the Chi, ie the mind leads the sensation of energy flow). Whether the phenomenon is physiologically real and measurable (e.g. the skin temperature changes during biofeedback experiments, mentioned above) or is an internal perception generated by and within the mind, unrelated to actual bodily events, perhaps the point here is that it feels real to the person at the time. For them, the Chi is flowing!

As a student of quantum physics and cosmology, I feel privileged to have been born at a time when we have made mind-boggling discoveries about the cosmos and its sub-atomic constituents and yet still have more to learn than we are currently capable of imagining.

On the subject of Chi, I would hate to be labeled as belonging to the "pink and fluffies" but neither do I subscribe to the "gloomy and pointless" view of the universe which leaves people very little reason for continuing to be here at all.

An atom, as we currently understand it, is composed of tiny, transient packets of energy, mere vibrations in the quantum froth of spacetime, which flit in and out of existence, move at unimaginable speeds and can be "entangled" so that whatever is done to one instantaneously affects the other, whatever the distance between them.

Moreover, 70% of the universe appears to be some invisible stuff called "dark energy", made from some-kind-of-we-know-not-what, which vastly outweighs the stuff that we can actually see.

In the light of the above, the concept of a universal primal energy field or "pre-birth chi" is surely no more far-fetched than many other current theories about the universe, including the possible existence of extra dimensions, infinite parallel universes, and the idea that our universe could be a hologram projected by something outside it.

As a teacher of Tai Chi Chuan, the concept of directing the flow of chi through the body is a useful one. Such exercises develop an overall internal bodily awareness and the ability to generate smooth, wave-like or spiral effects throughout the whole body. This in turn allows the body to move in the coordinated, sinuous manner which is characteristic of Tai Chi as an art form and contributes greatly to its effectiveness as a martial discipline. Using the power of the imagination to bring to mind an image of energy surging through the torso and limbs, like water through a pressure hose, can allow the body to move more smoothly and powerfully and can therefore vastly improve one's Tai Chi skills.

From my own personal experience, one event in particular opened my mind to the possible existence of a "life force" within the body.

A few years ago, I supported a dear family member through the last few days of her life. The day before she passed away, she asked me to place my hand on the top of her head, and this appeared to bring her some comfort. After she had passed on, a few minutes after the nurse had confirmed this, I again placed a hand on the top of her head in case she still retained any awareness and might yet gain some comfort from this action.

As my hand approached her head, I felt a kind of intense warmth moving at speed through my hand, in through the palm and out through the back. It was not simply that her head was warm to the touch (which it was, though the rest of her body was cold) it was a stream of warmth passing through my hand. I immediately withdrew the hand in astonishment. I felt as if I was somehow invading her privacy during a unique and deeply personal experience.

I have since learned that, in some cultures, there is a belief that the soul leaves the body through the top of the head. Had I known this at the time, I might have dismissed my experience as a psychosomatic event triggered by my own unconscious expectations, but as it was so entirely unexpected, I remain convinced that this was a real phenomenon and it has substantially altered my perceptions of reality and of life and death. It is a perception that I would like to share with others in view of the comfort it can bring to the bereaved. I knew, with a certainty greater than anything that could have been conveyed to me by books, teachers, priests or others (I do not follow any religion and, as you may have gathered, I have always been very skeptical when it comes to "mysterious energies" and similar other-worldly stuff) that my loved one no longer required the use of her physical body and had simply left it behind and moved on. This perception also removes any personal fear of dying.

In Qigong terminology, this may well have been an example of the Post-birth Chi returning to the Pre-birth Chi and it may be that, while this energy (if that's what it is) animates us, we are able to direct its flow at will.

What to Avoid

Beware of "Empty Force Gurus"! There are some people around who claim, for whatever reason, that there is a thing called "empty force". This is the alleged ability to project one's Chi out of one's body and issue it through the air, or even through a wall, to hit someone at a distance and injure them or knock them over without actually touching them.

Now this may or may not be true. We are still open to receiving a shred of scientific evidence to support this claim, if it ever emerges.

Many people have provided seemingly spectacular demonstrations of such feats at public events (some of which we have attended) and on YouTube. Some of these people have large numbers of followers and may well be amassing a fair amount of wealth on the strength of this reputation.

However, you may have seen a similar demonstration provided by non-martial artist Derren Brown, on his TV show "The Heist" in which, prior to causing a group of sensible, respectable business professionals (also non-martial artists as far as we know) to rob a security van, he put them in a room, performed a hypnotic induction and convinced half of them that they could issue empty force and the other half that they would feel this force and be knocked over by it. So half of them duly waved their arms around in a fairly menacing manner and the other half obligingly went down like a row of skittles.

Amazing? Not really. Showmen, charlatans and self-appointed "Sifus" have been doing similar stuff for years, usually with their own students who are already under the thrall of their undoubted charisma, or with good hypnotic subjects from the audience.

A famous trick is the domino effect in which you stand people in a line, one behind the other and each with their hands on the shoulders of the person in front of them, and then startle the impressionable person at the front (usually female, frail and easily intimidated) and watch the ripple effect as each person "feels something" and jumps back a bit and the person at the back falls on their bottom.

We have yet to see a convincing demonstration which did not involve the blatant use of hypnotic trance states. One demonstrator we saw had his students so deeply in trance to start with that they looked like zombies hung out on an invisible washing line. In their daily lives, these students were not only in awe of their teacher but genuinely scared of him and would willingly do the "Yes master, I will bounce for you" thing.

If you have not seen them already, you will find some interesting clips on You Tube in which such individuals are challenged to perform their feats with subjects other than their own students and with insufficient time to induce suitable hypnotic trance states. You can then observe them as they proceed to get beaten up or have glasses of water poured over their heads.

Sorry but, so far, we are generally unimpressed.

Nei Gong

Qigong and Martial Arts

There are three main reasons why most practitioners of Chinese martial arts include at least some Qigong in their training:

- Many of them believe that it will enhance their overall health, fitness and well-being, which are obviously desirable attributes for anyone cultivating the skills of self-protection.
- Sets of Qigong exercises can provide very useful warm-ups at the start of a class or training session, stretching and invigorating the body while calming and focusing the mind so that the practitioner is able to let go of outside concerns and give full attention to their training.
- Qigong exercises can assist in the development of martial skills

How Qigong exercises can improve martial skills:

The whole-body awareness and sensitivity developed during Qigong practice allows Tai Chi practitioners to sense their opponent's intention and anticipate their moves. Improvements in flexibility, coordination and balance can help them to flow around an opponent and evade blows and grabs.

The cultivation of a calm mind can also be useful in a fighting situation in order to think rationally, to remain relaxed, alert and in control and to avoid the pitfalls of fear and anger (both of which produce tension, interfere with martial skills and make us do stupid things!)

The control of breathing is very important in martial arts and there are specific Qigong exercises which can help to develop this control. The most useful of these are the Nei Gong exercises, or "iron shirt" techniques, which are designed to increase internal power and make the body strong and more resilient to blows.

In Chinese martial arts, the kind of breathing used should be Taoist breathing or "reverse breathing". One snag we have found is that many martial artists and their teachers have no idea what that is. Many people just interpret it as the opposite of abdominal breathing or Buddhist breathing (whole tummy in as you breathe out, whole tummy out as you breathe in, which is how babies breathe and is also great for use in some types of meditation).

However, this is not only a misconception; it is dangerous, particularly when used during explosive Fa Jing movements. If your whole abdomen is forced out during exhalation, it can result in umbilical hernia, hemorrhoids or a prolapsed uterus or bowel. Sadly, a lot of supposed masters have DVDs out showing exactly this and some have famously sustained one or more of the above injuries themselves as a result.

Actual reverse breathing, when done properly, does not have these risks. It is useful for generating power, protecting the body (especially the abdomen) from incoming blows, and it allows precision when delivering a strike or when using a sword in combat.

It is also extremely useful in childbirth during the second stage of labour and it is an aid to mastery of many practical skills and Zen disciplines from painting, drawing and calligraphy to golf, archery, brain surgery or anything else that requires a calm mind and a steady hand.

Some Nei Gong training also involves receiving blows to the body, which is invaluable preparation for the fighting arts since it helps to overcome the psychological fear of being hit. This is obviously only done in the very advanced classes and is not currently standard practice in our recreational classes attended by older people!

What to Avoid

1. Overdoing the fa jing.

Even when done properly, fa-jing (explosive release of power) should be practiced in moderation and with all appropriate precautions. Excessive practice can result in headaches from inadvertently shaking the brain and soreness around the lower spine from over-use of the muscles involved in rolling the dantien.

2. Showing off

We are not great believers in the need to prove the efficacy of one's iron shirt techniques by having blocks of concrete smashed over one's head or vehicles rolled over one's abdomen. Neat tricks if you know how they work and can pull them off but, apart from the risk of injury or worse, what does any of this prove? If circus performers are into this stuff, let them do it while the rest of us get on with some serious training.

"Spiritual" Qigong

The following story has been told many times and in many different ways, in different languages, in all parts of the world, throughout human history. It is included here because it explains what is meant by the Qigong concepts of Pre-birth and Post-birth Chi and it is also the basis of what is often known as "Spiritual Enlightenment".

The Onesong

*In the beginning, there was the Self. There was the One Self, and nothing but the Self.
The Self was All One. The Self was all-one. The self was al-one.*

*In its aloneness the Self considered itself. There was nothing else to consider, since the Self
was all there was.*

*The One Self looked at itself and, in the looking, became two: that which was looked at, and
that which was doing the looking.*

*In looking, there was here and there, and there was movement between the here and the
there. In movement, there was vibration, there was energy; and where there was energy there
were limitless possibilities.*

*And the voice of the One Self sang out the One Song, the One Verse, the Uni-Verse, and an
infinite richness of light and heat and sound vibrated into being. Within this great sea of
potential, each tiny note trembled and sped, emerged and dissolved and united with others in
great patterns and harmonies to give rise to suns and stones and butterfly wings and the
concepts of space and time. And the Onesong, in all its glory, was still One, and the Self was
still the One Self, and all things were simply aspects of that One Self.*

*But being is not the same as experiencing; in order to experience anything, it is necessary to
express it. For example, creativity is only experienced when it is expressed through the act
of creating something.*

Although the Self could never divide itself or become anything other than Self, the infinite shifting patterns within itself created opportunities to express its ideas and to experience them by shifting the position through which it observed the whole.

It could observe from the perspective of a galaxy or a garden snail. It could experience the totality of its whole being, or reflect upon the qualities of a rose through the senses and mental processes of a child.

And, being a child, it could imagine that those senses and mental processes were all it was, and forget its totality for a while. It could believe itself to be limited and small within an infinite playground, and be awed by the presence of something vast and seemingly other than itself.

It could do that for a whole lifetime or for many lifetimes; or perhaps forever. But there was a sadness in that, because a tiny being within a limitless universe could feel helpless and small and insignificant and thereby lose its sense of meaning and purpose in life.

So, like a traveler in a strange land leaving signs on the road so that he could always find his way back home, it left clues to remind itself of its true identity and in each lifetime it played out the Great Game, the solving of the mystery of "What Am I?"

And the game itself provided meaning and purpose and enjoyment; and when the mystery was solved within a lifetime, that embodiment lived out its remaining years in full awareness of its identity as both a small, separate being and as its whole, universal Self, and this state of awareness became known among human beings as "Enlightenment."

The one, universal Self is known by many names, and one of them is Tao. Its energy is sometimes known as Pre-birth Chi, and the part of that energy field or life force that animates a particular individual throughout its lifetime is called Post-birth Chi. Lao Tzu says of this process: "Continually emerging, it returns again and again to nothingness."

The Chinese internal martial arts, qigong, meditation and the various disciplines of yoga can potentially enable us to remember our true identity (to re-member); just as a finger re-members when it is stitched back onto a hand and becomes a fully-functioning part of a living body once more (or, more accurately, when a finger that was never cut off in the first place but imagined itself to be going it alone, starts to wise up and check out its actual place in the grand scheme of things), or as a wave becomes aware of its true identity as ocean.

The Song of Hsing Yi talks about this "Grand Space" (WuChi) from which man is born; a place where there is "no fighting and no competition", this place that the Yi (mind) can reach when it is still and thoughts die away like the muddy waters of a turbulent stream as it merges with a vast, crystal clear river and is absorbed into the great flow. "Wu and Wey rivers not dividing". They were never really separate in the first place.

Even the Bible refers to this. "Be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46) reminds us that when we still the body and mind, we can be aware that the "I" in each of us is that One Self. To "love thy neighbour as thyself" is a natural consequence of knowing that neighbour to be your Self.

The word "namaste", and the palms-together gesture that normally accompanies it, is used to indicate that the Self in you recognises and acknowledges the Self in the person in front of you as being one and the same. (It does not mean that the little individual self (ego) in one person is saying "Hi" to someone else's ego.)

If we were all to become aware of this oneness, there would be no reason or excuse for war or the kind of atrocities which continue to fill our newspapers and TV screens on a day to day basis.

It is sad to hear that so many people are afraid of being still, calming the mind and just being present in the here and now. This can also be called "looking within" but it does not refer to introspection and mulling over thoughts (which is a major cause of depression) or to a zombie-like blankness which leaves you open to hypnotic suggestion. It is just allowing the mind to fall still while being completely alert and awake, with a wider awareness and with a greater capacity to think clearly and engage effectively with reality than is the normal state of affairs as we go about our day to day lives. Not everyone considers this to be desirable.

Indeed the practice of falling silent and simply being has been actively discouraged in some parts of the world, at different times. For example, in a BBC Radio Four programme *The Museum of Curiosity*, it was mentioned that silence was taught in British schools until the fourteenth century, but was dropped when it was recognised that it encouraged people to become too intelligent, autonomous and able to think for themselves! This was a fearsome thought for the political and religious leaders of the day!

Things don't change much. You will no doubt have heard of the thousands of Qigong practitioners in the Far East who are currently being imprisoned, tortured and executed for practicing certain types of Qigong, mostly still meditation. (Check out the Amnesty International website for further information about this.) People who can still the mind and lower emotional arousal can think more rationally and are less easily manipulated and exploited by the media, governments and the advertising industry.

In the field of psychology, it is recognised that when the mind is emotionally aroused, the logical brain takes a back seat and the emotional brain does the thinking, which is often illogical and sometimes pathological. Calming down is a prerequisite of the route back to mental health and well-being; therefore the ability to help people to relax is a key skill for any psychotherapist.

What is not so well known is that, when both emotional and rational thoughts settle, one can step further back still. When you reach your "inner self" you may be surprised to find that it is not the quivering, insecure little "inner child" that you imagined it to be and strived so hard to hide and protect; rather, that Self in you is the same Self in everyone and is more powerful than anything you might previously have conceived of.

Though of course, if what you are looking for is power for its own sake, you are never likely to find it. That's the paradox.

What to Avoid

Cults, gurus and other dodgy characters who use the internal focus of Qigong as a hypnotic induction to get you to do what they want you to do. It is not just the fields of qigong and meditation which are potentially subject to misuse in this way.

These days, a cult's initial emphasis is more likely to be on "professional development", "self-cultivation" or "business training" rather than anything overtly religious or "alternative", but the results can be the same.

Beware of "self-development" programmes involving:

- "getting together like-minded people" for long hours of discussion and training (sleep deprivation and brain washing),
- lots of hugs and cuddles, team games and mutual back patting (or subtle humiliation and ridicule if you disagree with the group or its charismatic leader),
- "reducing attachments" to your family and friends
- parting with large amounts of money
- being sent away eager to convert as many other people as possible to your new way of thinking.

There are some useful warning signs to look out for listed on Wikipedia and various other websites.

Reputable qigong or meditation practitioners won't be frightened of answering questions, will have your best interests at heart and won't expect you to remortgage your house to pay for your "teaching/therapy/training" (though also be aware that some cults may use free sessions to get you in the door).

In general, enjoy your qigong and the considerable benefits it offers but keep your feet on the ground, your eyes open and your running shoes on!

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