

Tai Chi Nation guide to Qigong - Part 1

We hope this guide will help introduce you to and inspire you in the practice of Tai Chi Qigong. We love this wonderful art and have gained so much benefit from it ourselves over the years. It feels good to have the opportunity of sharing it with you.

Essential Aspects

Qigong practice relies on five key aspects:

- **Relaxation** of the body
- Relaxed abdominal **breathing**
- Correct **posture**
- Body **alignment**
- **Moderation** in extent of movement
- Focus of the **mind** ("Yi" or mind intention)

Relaxation of the Body

Stress, bad posture, overwork, poor diet and negative patterns of thought leave our bodies tense and out of balance. These factors in turn lead to disease and limit our quality of life. By learning how to relax the body by using the power of our mind and fluid movement, we can establish the correct flow of Qi in our bodies and enjoy the benefits of improved relaxation and the energising effects this can have.

In Qigong we bring our mind into contact with our body, holding the intent in our mind to relax each part of the body, and to soften any areas of tension and tightness. In essence, we can massage our bodies just using the power of our mind. This new skill, as well as helping us during Qigong practice, can also help us check tension in our bodies during our everyday life, enhancing our ability to defeat stress and helping us break negative patterns of thought.

Relaxed Abdominal Breathing

Normally we only breathe using the upper half of our lungs. This means that the amount of oxygen in our blood is limited so haemoglobin levels are also limited. The lower parts of the lungs remain in a near dormant state and the diaphragm is not used properly. In Qigong we do not use force or try to push our breathing further but by relaxing the body the breath naturally deepens. The diaphragm extends downwards as you breathe in and upwards as you breathe out.

The effect of this is to improve the oxygenation of the blood and raise haemoglobin levels, which will in turn boost the body's ability to heal itself and fight disease. The action of the diaphragm also helps to improve digestion and absorption of food nutrients as it gently massages the internal organs.

In terms of Qigong, breath is a form of Qi and the Taoists also believed that air contains cosmic Qi and was essential for the harmony of the individual. In Chinese Medicine, "breath Qi" combines with "food essence Qi", producing "Wei Qi" or defensive Qi. Wei Qi helps to protect our bodies from illness and disease.

Correct Posture

Qigong helps to retrain our posture. The head is level, with the chin slightly tucked in, shoulders relaxed, chest relaxed and not pushed out.

Body Alignment

Whilst it is important to keep the body relaxed, this refers primarily to the muscles. As far as the skeletal system (bones and joints) are concerned, it is important to keep this in alignment as this will help the Qi flow around the body more freely.

Body alignment in Qigong practice primarily refers to keeping the body upright, that is:

- imagining the crown of your head is suspended from a golden thread
- relaxing all the muscles down through the legs and into the ground through the soles of the feet

Body alignment also refers to alignment between the key acupuncture points. This is done primarily through taking the correct postures while performing movements.

Moderation in Extent of Movement

We suggest you limit the extent of individual movements so that no excessive strain is felt. All movement should be natural and relaxed. Persistent practice without straining or forcing anything will allow you to reach the full extent of a movement within time. Be patient.

For example, when bending forwards at the waist, it is not wise to allow your arms hand any lower than feel natural. Forcing this movement could result in back injury.

If you do try and force things, the gradual increase in range of movement will be retarded.

Focus of the Mind

Qigong practice exercises the mind just as much as the body, and can be considered as a body awareness meditation. Many meditation practices begin with bodywork, moving attention into the body.

Establishing a calm mind then helps you receive body sensations and begin cultivating physical well-being. Conversely, such a base of physical well-being allows the mind's attention to settle into the body more deeply.

As the mind calms and the body relaxes into the posture, the mental mood becomes more tranquil and we can realize a sense of peacefulness and effortlessness. With this quality of attention there is no need to force the body upright, the whole energy body supports itself and you can begin to experience a sense of rootedness *and* buoyancy. As the subtle bodily energies begin to flow more freely, these begin to blend and merge with the mental energies.

The important thing is to notice your state of mind and the thought content and gently bring your mind back into your body and the exercise. In order to make this easy, it might be useful to focus on one area of the body (ie. the shoulders, soles of the feet, or palms of the hands) or simply be aware of the whole body standing on the ground.

The important point is not to force anything. Treat your mind as you would treat your body. Be gentle. There are no *shoulds* and *shouldnts* in this practice.

MINI QIGONG SESSION

Holding the Ball of Light

This is a really simple yet profound standing Qigong exercise that is excellent for sensing into the body, calming the mind, and energizing the Middle Dan Dian area (in the area of the heart and chest cavity). It also incorporates a very beneficial visualisation which enhances connection with Qi.



Begin with palms facing each other at the level of your heart, and your feet roughly shoulder width apart. As you Breathe in allow the ball to expand; as you breathe out allow the ball to reduce. Focus on the sensation in your hands. Imagine that with each in breath your body is filling with Qi in the form of light. Relax and soften with each out breath.

Gradually, allow the whole body to fill with light; as you breathe out imagine/feel any tensions, blockage, or disease to melt away. Allow the body and mind to continuously fill with light, and any problems to melt away. In time, you can allow the light to fill the entire area around the body (about one arms length around the body).

Self Massage Qigong (abdomen)

This is another simple Qigong exercise, and is very good for the digestion and feeling more centred. It can also help bring a sense of inner peace and well being. In essence, it is a gentle massage incorporating natural, relaxed and deep breathing, together with visualisation.



Begin with palms on the lower Dan Dian (below the naval area) and focus on the sensation in the palms. After standing quietly for a few moments to centre yourself, begin circling the palms up the left side of the lower abdomen with the in breath, and down the rights side with the out breath. Do this a few times, and then change direction. Imagine light/Qi coming in through the palms, filling all the internal organs and the whole body and mind, melting away tensions, blockages, and disease. Then allow the light/Qi to fill an area around the body to a distance of about one arms length in every direction. Finally, bring your attention back to the Dan Dian, and imagine a ball of light in that area.

Settling the Qi

This is a wonderfully simple calming Qigong exercise that you can practice at any time, particularly when you are feel busy, rushed and stressed. It helps bring Qi back into the body to the Dan Dian, where it can be stored. This can also help you feel more settled and calm closing off the Qi so it is available for future use when you need it.

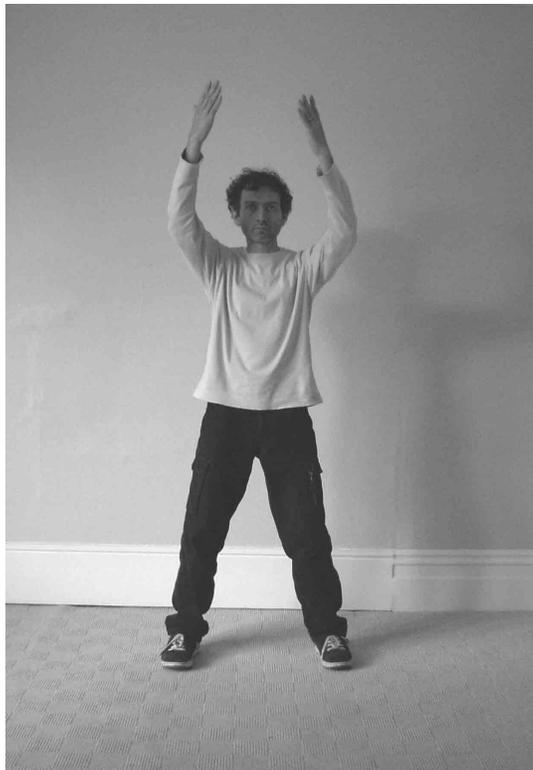
As you do this exercise, you can imagine (especially if you are visually oriented) drawing energy down from the sky, through the crown of the head, down through the body to the Dan Dian.

- 1) Stand in a relaxed and quiet stance with the feet shoulder width apart. Palms facing up with the finger towards one another but not touching





2) Open out the arms to your side until they come above your head



3) Bring the palms down towards your forehead with the Lao Gong points facing your forehead. Left hand nearest the forehead with the right hand over it for men (reverse – left over right – for women)



4) Draw your hands gently down through the center line of your chest and back down to the Dan Dian.



We hope you have enjoyed reading about Qigong practice and gained some enjoyment from practicing the exercises we have introduced.

This guide has been prepared jointly by Andrew Broadhead and Matthew Rochford

If you want to know or experience more, we offer a whole load of resources to support you on your journey, so please feel free to browse the website.

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