

THE BEAUTIFUL MOVEMENT

The ancient practice known as qigong is thought to work such mind/body wonders as slowing the aging process and fostering tranquility. Discover why so many people are embracing it.

By Shoshanna Katzman

Shoshanna Katzman practicing her art, which, she says, offers you "an ageless body and a peaceful mind."





A HUNDRED MILLION IS A LOT of anything. That's the number of people who are estimated to go into parks in China in the early dawn hours to practice the physical, mental, and spiritual fitness routine known as *qigong* (pronounced "chee-gung"), sets of graceful movements and postures that are like a simple dance. With its Eastern concepts—yin, yang, meridians, and more—and exotic names for various positions, like Fluffing White Clouds and Swan Stretches Her Wings, *qigong's* ancient (it originated prior to 500 B.C.) techniques can sometimes be hard for Westerners to grasp, but we're starting to embrace its gentle potency. *The Wall Street Journal*, no less, recently reported on *qigong* as "the hottest trend in stress relief" under the headline "The Next Yoga."

Qigong's basic philosophy is contained in the word itself, which is derived from two Chinese characters. The first, *qi* (or *chi*), I'm happy to say, is becoming more and more familiar here; it refers to our vital energy, that force that animates every living being. Sometimes translated as "the vapor of the finest matter," the character for *qi* represents the steam that rises from a grain of cooked rice, symbolizing distilled essence. The second character, *gong*, means "practice" or "cultivation." *Qigong*, then, is the cultivation of vital energy.

Photographs by
Jan Cobb

Qigong Basics

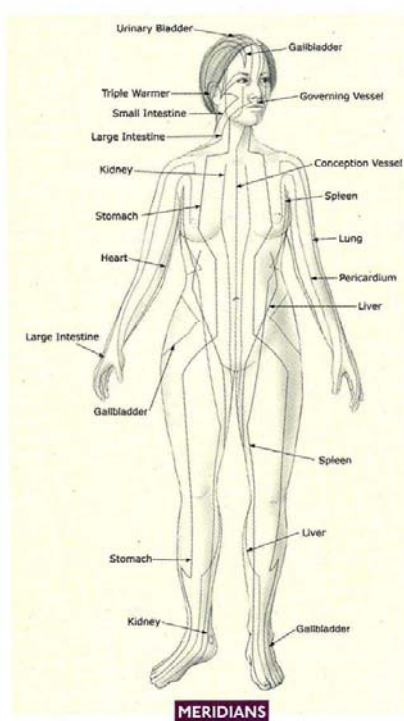
¶ Qigong is most beneficial when you practice regularly; every day is ideal, but three times a week or even once a week is fine.

¶ If indoors, practice in a room with no drafts, no strong fragrances, and good ventilation. Practice outdoors when possible; you'll gather qi from nature.

¶ Don't eat or drink anything 15 minutes before or after your session.

¶ Practice at your own pace; some days you'll want to move faster, other days more slowly. It's absolutely fine to take 20 minutes to do even one exercise.

¶ Keep knees slightly bent, head and neck upright; focus eyes straight out or slightly down into the distance.



How does this work, and what does it accomplish? In the Chinese view, qi is stored in energy reservoirs called *dantians* ("dahn-tee-en") and travels through the body by way of meridians, invisible pathways that conduct energy much the way our circulatory or nervous systems conduct blood and electrical impulses (see the meridians illustration below). Located along the main meridians are various acupoints, also known as acupuncture or acupressure points, that, when stimulated, allow you to tap into deeper energies of the body. During qigong practice, many meridians and their acupoints are stimulated, invigorating circulation and releasing blockages of qi, thereby opening its flow throughout the body, balancing yin and yang. This state of being, if cultivated consistently, is thought to do a lot of wonderful things: prevent illness; stop the progression of disease; strengthen and detoxify vital organs; strengthen bones, muscles, ligaments, and tendons; relieve stress; increase mental clarity; promote tranquility and vibrancy; and greatly slow, even reverse, our body's aging process.

Qigong has been studied by physicians of Traditional Chinese Medicine for millennia (it's one of the four major branches of TCM, the others being acupuncture, herbal medicine, and massage), but Western scientists have only recently begun to apply scientific methods to the practice. Still, initial

studies of qigong and the related qigong-related exercise tai chi (a moving meditation practice with roots in the martial arts) show that regular practice lowers blood pressure; improves heart function; eases addictions; significantly reduces falls and fractures in the elderly; and reduces fatigue, anxiety, tension, and depression. Whatever the state of the science at this point, what's irrefutable is that qigong is a gentle, slow, life-enhancing form of exercise that can be practiced by anyone, anywhere. Besides its physical benefits, practicing for even a short time will help you focus on your goals and achieve them; it will also develop your intuition and enhance peace of mind.

There are hundreds of qigong exercises to explore and enjoy, but I have fine-tuned this simple, effective sequence to introduce you to the practice. Though beneficial for anyone, the workout is specially tailored for women over 35. After that age, there's no denying that our bodies change, our hormones change, and often our emotions follow suit. But when we learn to harness qi, we flower into the sexy, powerful, vital, mature women we were born to be. Subtle yet powerful, the results will astound you. ∞

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A Qigong Glossary

Qi: Vital energy; it's the force that animates life and all biological processes, the most familiar of the Three Treasures.

Jing: The essence of your bodily fluids; the source of sexual maturation, reproduction, and growth

Shen: The spirit; represents all aspects of consciousness and mind and the connection to higher consciousness

The Three Treasures: Qi, jing, and shen together; they are intimately related to health and aging, and sufficient amounts of each are essential.

Dantians: Reservoirs of energy; there are three, but the lower dantian, two inches below the navel and two inches into the abdomen, is considered the key to healing and the focal point in qigong practice. The middle dantian is in the mid-chest; the upper, just above the point at the center of the eyes.

Meridians: Energy pathways; qi travels through the body by these specific routes, which run from the top of the head to the tips of the toes and also between the major organs.

ILLUSTRATION: BROOK WAINWRIGHT

**RAG-DOLL TWIST**

To begin activating qi, rub your hands together quickly until friction and heat are produced. Then, standing with your feet parallel and slightly wider than shoulder-width apart, open your arms out to your sides at a 45-degree angle.

(1) Swing both of your arms to the left, your right arm crossing in front of your body and your left arm crossing behind. Allow your upper body to twist as it follows the motion of the arms, pivoting your right foot inward on the toe.



(2) As your arms gently whip around, the palm of your right hand taps the middle left side of your torso; the back of your left hand taps your lower back on the right side. Reverse, now gently whipping your arms to the right, pivoting on

your left toe; left palm taps the right torso, back of the right hand taps the left side of your lower back.

Continue as long as you like, but at least three times on each side. Have fun as you flop your hands and arms from side to side.

Warm Up

This simple warm-up exercise, the Rag-Doll Twist, works through gentle yet vigorous tapping of the body, which awakens and activates the flow of qi by stimulating acupoints along the meridians. Prepare yourself by quieting any mental noise you are experiencing. Envision unnecessary thoughts floating away like clouds. Take a deep breath, and center yourself in the present.

After completing the warm up, do the main exercise sequence, Lady Raises Lotus to the Temple, beginning on page 70, then the warm down below.

**SMOOTHING BELLY QI**

(1) Stand with feet apart; position your hands in front of your lower dantian, palms facing your

body, fingertips pointing toward each other, arms rounded. Breathing naturally, move your hands around in a circle either above or actually



touching your belly. Visualize all of the generated qi condensing into a small ball of energy to be stored in your dantian. Continue

as long as you like, but for at least 30 seconds. (2) Reverse the direction of your hands, continuing the visualization.

Warm Down

This very simple warm down, called Smoothing Belly Qi, gathers the qi generated during the warm up and Lady Raises Lotus to the Temple, consolidating it and storing it within the lower dantian, your precious reservoir of healing vital energy.

If you would like to further explore qigong, the National Qigong Association (nqa.org) can help you find a qualified instructor in your area.

Nourishing Three Treasures

The qigong exercise shown here, called Lady Raises Lotus to the Temple, gathers, cleanses, and balances what are known in Traditional Chinese Medicine as the Three Treasures—*qi*, *jing*, and *shen* (see "A Qigong Glossary," page 68). The way you cultivate and protect the Three Treasures is thought to determine the quality and length of your life.

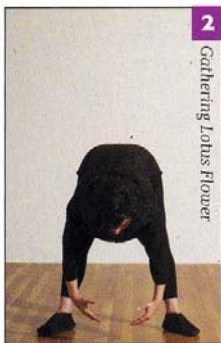
The lotus in this exercise represents the combined and refined Three Treasures. The temple represents the heavenly and divine. As you move the lotus upward, you nourish the Three Treasures in all three dantians by smoothing scattered *qi*, promoting a plentiful supply of *jing*, calming and nourishing the *shen*, and creating ample blood flow. The end result of bringing the lotus to the temple is a clear and peaceful mind, a strong and focused will, and a body filled with health, one resistant to disease and degeneration—heaven on earth, you could say.

Perform this set with slow, purposeful movements. Relax completely and imagine all impurities leaving through your feet. Do as many sets as you like, but do at least three, briefly pausing between sets to feel the *qi* before beginning another. I suggest taking four complete breaths (inhale plus exhale) per set, but the most important thing is that you breathe deeply and comfortably.*



1

Opening



2

Gathering Lotus Flower



3

Nourishing Jing Treasure

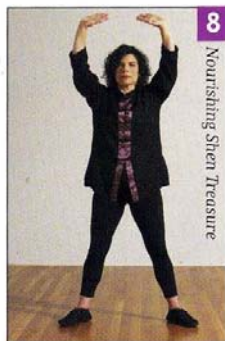
LADY RAISES LOTUS TO THE TEMPLE

(1) Stand with your feet wider than shoulder-width apart, pointing out at a 45-degree angle. Keep your back straight, head erect, hands by your sides, and

buttocks tucked under. (2) Begin your inhalation and bend forward from your waist, reaching down with your hands. Bring energy into both of your hands as you scoop up an imaginary lotus flower from the ground.

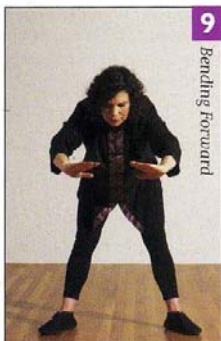
(3) Raise the flower upward along the center of the front of your body, to your lower dantian. Notice any heaviness or tingling in your hands. In this upward motion, your arms are rounded, palms

face up, fingertips point toward each other, and there is a taut sensation in your palms. Notice the *qi* gathering in your fingertips. (4) Continue up, completing your first inhalation as your hands arrive at your middle.



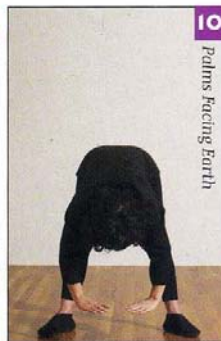
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Nourishing Shen Treasure



9

Bending Forward



10

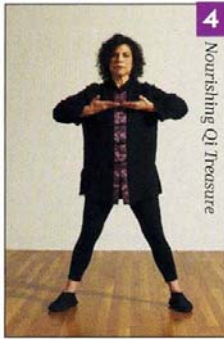
Palms Facing Earth

fingertips point toward each other, palms pushing up toward the sky. Your entire being is full of *shen*, as you experience lightness and clarity, stimulating your upper dantian. (9) Begin your exhalation and bend forward from your waist, arms extending in a rounded position

in front of you, pushing your palms outward and downward. (10) Finish your exhalation with your back straight, palms facing the earth and hands filled with heaviness again. (11) Inhale and fan your fingertips out; scoop the *qi*. (12) Lift the flower up again along the front and center of

your body to your lower dantian. (13) Hands arrive at your middle dantian. (14) Continue upward, pushing your palms toward the heavens and lifting up onto your toes as you complete your inhalation. Again, you may experience a sensation of great power and a burst of energy.

(15) Begin the last exhalation, opening your arms out to your sides with palms facing down, fingertips trailing behind, and arms outstretched. Allow your hands to flow gently down like leaves falling from a tree. (16) End with hands relaxed by your sides as you complete your exhalation.



4 Nourishing Qi Treasure

dantian. Elbows bent, your palms face upward on a horizontal plane across the front of your body, fingertips almost touching.

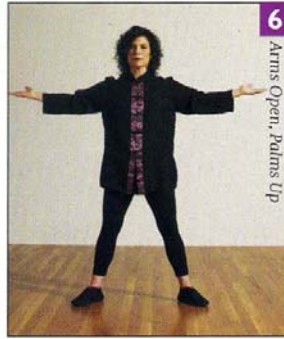
(5) On your exhalation, extend your hands out in front of you, pinky



5 Offering Lotus Flower

fingers touching. Feel the qi flowing out of the tips of your fingers as you extend your hands with elbows slightly bent. With your arms fully extended, your exhalation is complete as you offer your lotus flower

to the world, your palms taut with qi. (6) Inhale and open your arms out wide at shoulder height, maintaining a slight bend in your elbows. Continue until your arms extend out, palms still facing up as



6 Arms Open, Palms Up

you complete your inhalation. (7) Next, arms still lifted, exhale and push your palms out as if you were pushing against walls to each side of you. Imagine that you are expelling all of the negative energy

from your body as you push out. Again, your palms are as taut as the skin of a drum. Imagine cords of qi streaming out of them, up from your lower and middle dantians. This motion creates a tremen-



7 Arms Open, Palms Pushing

dous amount of power and energy. (8) Inhale and begin raising your hands up toward the sky, palms still facing out, fingertips leading as your arms form an arc above you. At the end of this movement, your



11 Hands Gathering Earth Qi



12 Nourishing Jing Treasure



13 Nourishing Qi Treasure



14 Nourishing Shen Treasure



15 Hands Flowing Downward



16 Closing

*The suggested number of breaths is just a guide; the number will vary depending on your capacity and on how slowly you do the exercise. If you have difficulty with the breathing instructions, try taking two complete breaths whenever the directions call for one.

Your breathing capacity will improve with time. It's a worthy

goal; the coordination of moving with breathing creates a connection between "Heaven," the yang healing power of the stars, moon, sun, and other planets, and "Earth," the yin healing power of rivers, oceans, lakes, trees, rocks, soil, and mountains. Moving with your breath, you begin to feel your body as an integrated whole, deeply connected to all of nature.