

Qigong and Tai Chi: a health journey into your advancing years

Everyone had heard of Tai Chi, but Qigong isn't as well known.

Qigong is a traditional Chinese practice of exercise for health, healing and increasing vitality. Tai Chi, a branch of Qigong, was originally developed as a martial art, but now it too is practiced for health.

The emphasis is on keeping relaxed and the repetition of flowing movements. For centuries it has been the favoured exercise in China, villagers gathering in a park or open space to practice together at the same time every day.

There are many health, fitness and well-being benefits in these energising exercises which work on developing and improving the energy flows in the body. Particularly beneficial are increased mobility of the spine, improved flexibility, easing arthritis, better balance and posture.

Dylan Thomas had a combative view on old age:

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

I'm no Dylan Thomas, but I would have written it as:

Do, do go gentle into that good night,
Qigong will relax and energise at close of day;
Health and Qi in the dying of the light.

Inevitably, as you age, you slowly drop out of those exercises and sports you have done all your life.

What was your exercise or sport when you were younger?

I gave up squash at 26 with a broken cartilage and an awareness of the stress it put on my ankles, knees and hips.

Why did you stop?

Was it losing when you were used to winning? Feeling you were being carried or letting the team down?

Was it loss of speed, strength, suppleness, agility, balance, reaction times, eyesight - what made you give up the sport of your youth?

Was it loss of interest or injury? Interests change, injuries occur. Be it your shoulder from tennis, knee from football or squash, twisted ligaments from jogging, disillusionment with the effort and boredom of the gym, crowded and dirty swimming pools or the danger of cycling, they all eventually fall by the wayside.

Was it recovery time from injury, breathlessness, arthritis, wearing joints, brittle bones, lack of energy, not learning and remembering what to do as easily as you used to?

Was it floor exercises? That awful experience where you feel the odd one out - getting down and lying on the floor is difficult, the postures unattainable and,

unlike a fit twenty-year old you can no longer spring up off the floor, but scramble, relying on a chair for support and feel extremely self-conscious.

Or not walking as well, not being able to keep up with the group, no longer coping with hills or stiles? Do you now prefer a potter to a five-mile country ramble?

And I sure that this is by no means a comprehensive list of reasons why we stop doing the exercise we used to.

There is a Qigong saying on the ageing process: after sixty we become weaker every year, after seventy weaker every month, after eighty weaker every week and after ninety weaker every day.

There is no particular age when you look on yourself as old, or elderly. We are all on our own life's journey and slip out of middle age into the elderly category at different times. Many healthy septuagenarians argue they are still in middle age, and I have observed octogenarians who are fitter, better coordinated, more flexible and with better memories than some sexagenarians.

The ageing process is a slow deterioration where you can't move as well, stretch as far, twist as much or touch toes. Balance goes, reaction times lengthen, memory deteriorates, hearing is hard. To differing degrees you feel stiff, tired, sick and lack energy. You start to lack confidence and take longer to recover from injury, falls and operations. Slowly there is a closing down and a seizing up.

Many in their sixties, seventies, eighties and nineties are looking for an exercise program that they can manage and continue with as they age. Life is now more of an effort, and you start to hide how you feel, perhaps acting as if you have a more healthy, vigorous body than you really have.

Qigong works with you as you face these limitations.

Increasingly medical and alternative practitioners are recommending Qigong as a great exercise for those over sixty and this trend will continue.

It is implicit that most sports and health activities are driven by results: competition, winning, personal best, achieving postures, progressing through levels. The result is what matters, rather than the means to the end - the journey.

With Qigong, yes the correct postures are to be worked for, but always within your limitations and always by waiting for them to happen. You don't have to achieve those deep positions, postures, stances and stretches you used to do.

Confucius talked of *wu wei*, the idea of inaction, inertia and effortless action, concepts alien to many sports and health activities.

When we relax, exercise within our limitations and enjoy the journey, then the mind/body combination work together on achieving the desired postures. After a few months of Qigong, when you look back, your postures are

stronger, deeper and more precise, the balance is improving. You feel healthier and fitter; you are less stressed and more relaxed.

Year-by year, as you age, you can keep on with Qigong. Of course, as with everyone, you are still growing older and things fall off, don't work as well or pack up altogether.

But Qigong will both slow the inevitable ageing process and make you fitter, healthier and more alert to cope with ageing and keep you living actively.

One of the most energised Qigong classes I have observed was in a residential care home where most of the participants were showing different degrees of dementia. They joined in as best they could, aided by their carers, some wheelchair bound, some with inactive limbs following strokes. They were all enthusiastic, performing very basic Qigong movements and enjoying themselves. Many would not have remembered attending but all gained from the class.

Drawing on the martial arts background of Tai Chi as an analogy, keeping healthy is a fight, the enemies you battle with are many.

The enemies aren't obvious, it isn't someone attacking you, wanting a fight, forcing you to defend or attack.

The enemies are hidden, and it is how we respond and react to them that matters.

It is avoiding that accident waiting to happen: being aware of that bike coming up fast on the pavement, maintaining your balance when you trip on a rug rather than falling flat on your face, feeling the ice below your foot before you slip on it.

It is the onset of arthritis, a virus or illness beaten by a healthy mind and body with strong energy, excellent balance, reactions and self-awareness.

Go on, find a class near you, and give it a go.

Which should you choose, Qigong or Tai Chi?

Some prefer to slowly learn a Tai Chi form over a number of months, others prefer the greater variety of exercises and more extensive range of body movements available in Qigong.

If you can't decide then I suggest you start by trying out a Qigong class. You can always transfer to a Tai Chi class later.

Here are a few things to be aware of when you turn up at your first class:

- If you have any medical concerns about Qigong or Tai Chi then consult your doctor and speak to your instructor.
- Don't think you are unique. The instructor will be used to working with people of all age groups and will encourage you to work within your limitations.
- Wear loose-fitting clothes and flat shoes.

- Be aware of the temperature. Wear layers to keep warm when it is cool or cold.
- Use your discretion before engaging in the class exercises and do not join in any that may aggravate a weakness or injury, but stand or sit until the next exercise.
- Grab a chair if you need help balancing, the instructor will expect some of the class to do this.
- Sit down and take time out when you need to.
- You will soon make friends with the others in the class, people on the same health journey as you. Groups often go to a café afterwards for a cuppa and a time for socialising.
- Talk to your instructor about your concerns, limitations, ailments and injuries. The instructor may be able to recommend specific exercises for your condition.
- Establish a daily exercise routine at home, based on what you remember from the classes. From experience, this is difficult to achieve, but those that do reap the health advantages.

Qigong has so many health and fitness benefits, working as it does on posture, energy, limbs, bones, tendons, joints, muscles, blood, skin and internal organs.

You will have unbounded energy, sound sleeping habits, good posture and balance. It helps flexibility, coordination, breathing, grounding and strength.

You will feel far more relaxed as Qigong is a great stress-buster involving as it does, meditation, mindfulness, concentration, mental stimulation, visualisation, mind-body connection, eye-mind coordination, memory training and connections with nature.

Take up Qigong and you will improve your probability of having a long, active and healthy life. Live in an ageless springtime.

Go for it!

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