

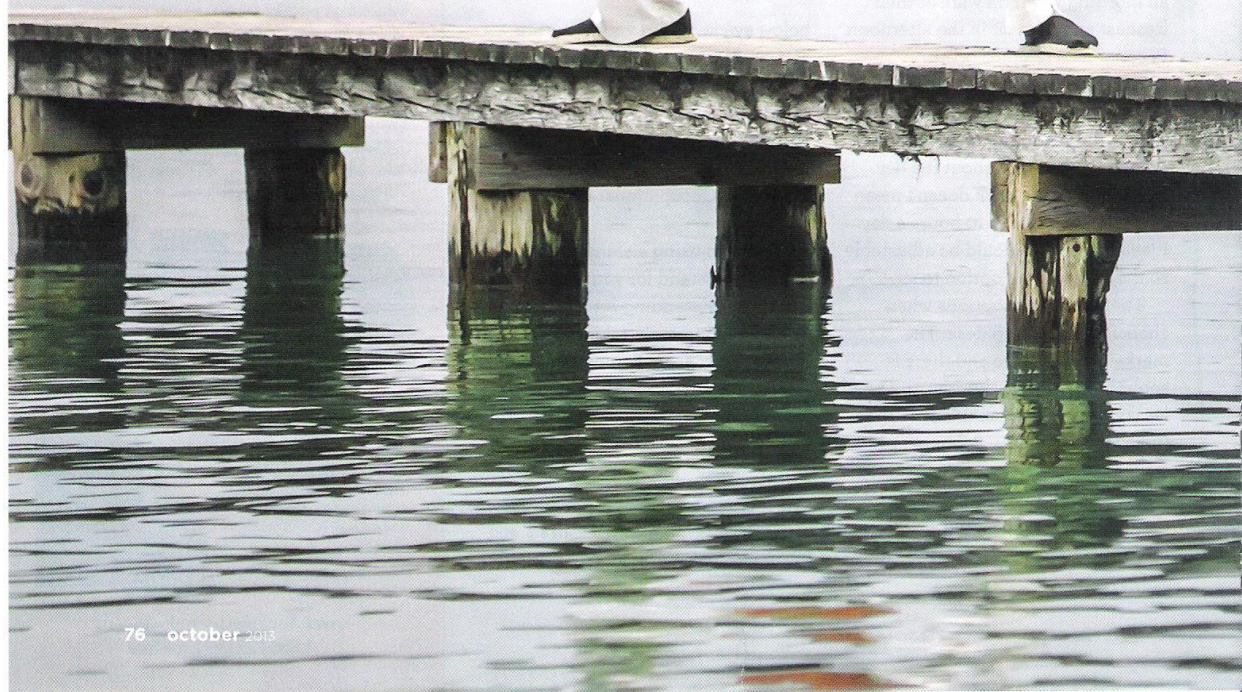
HEALTH

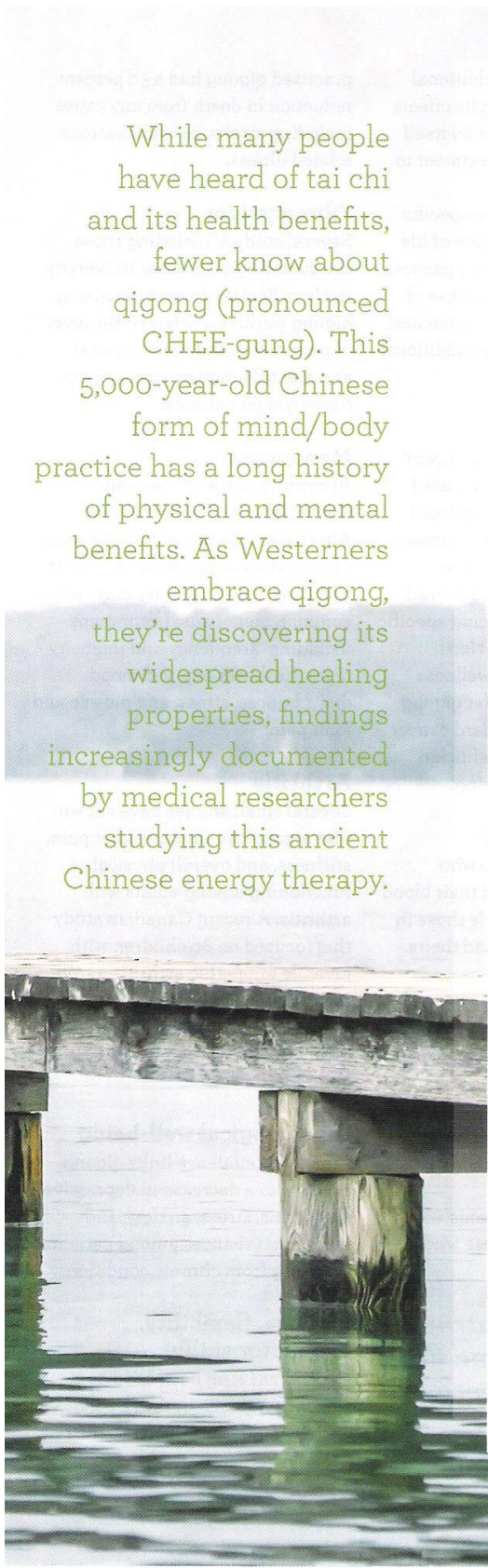
the healing practice of

qigong

Go with the (energy) flow

| Harriet Cooper





While many people have heard of tai chi and its health benefits, fewer know about qigong (pronounced CHEE-gung). This 5,000-year-old Chinese form of mind/body practice has a long history of physical and mental benefits. As Westerners embrace qigong, they're discovering its widespread healing properties, findings increasingly documented by medical researchers studying this ancient Chinese energy therapy.

WHAT IS QIGONG?

Qigong concentrates on the release and flow of the body's energy. Its postures and exercises emphasize slow, circular movements that may be combined with regulated breathing, meditation, self-massage, and guided imagery to stimulate the flow of chi or energy.

Unlike other mind/body practices, qigong is based on the principle that practitioners can direct the body's energy, remove blockages believed to lead to disease and dysfunction, and encourage the body to achieve a natural state of balance and health. By helping the body heal itself, the regular practice of qigong may possibly reverse the effects of certain age-related diseases such as arthritis or high blood pressure.

THE FOUR SCHOOLS

There are different schools of qigong, but they generally fall into four categories or applications.

1. **Healing or medical qigong** concentrates on prevention and self-healing based on traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) theories of energy channels.
2. **External qi healing** allows a practitioner (known as a healer) to tap into healing energy and direct it toward a patient.
3. **Sports or martial arts qigong** improves strength and stamina, as well as coordination, flexibility, balance, and resistance to injury.
4. **Spiritual qigong** focuses on self-awareness, tranquility, and harmony with nature.

While their main focus may vary, these applications often share some of the same techniques and exercises. Their ultimate goal is the same: to maintain health, promote the body's healing and balance, and increase vitality.

HEALTH BENEFITS

Much of today's research on qigong's health benefits comes from China and tends to be small case studies, rather than the large, randomized, controlled trials favoured by Western researchers. However, as qigong ➤

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catches on in the West, additional research is being done on its effects on the human body, either by itself or as a complementary treatment to Western medicine.

Studies have focused on specific medical conditions or quality of life issues. While qigong is not a panacea, preliminary studies in a number of areas have shown positive outcomes, with researchers calling for additional larger studies.

Cancer

Studies in China, Hong Kong, and Australia indicate that when used in combination with conventional methods, qigong improved immune function, mood status, muscle mobility and strength, and overall quality of life, while reducing specific side effects of treatment. North American hospitals and wellness centres are starting to offer qigong as a complement to standard cancer care, recognizing its benefits for quality of life and well-being.

High blood pressure

In a 20-year study, people who practised qigong reduced their blood pressure medication, while those in the control group increased theirs.

Immune system

A study showed an improvement in immune system functioning, based on white blood cell counts, after only one month of daily 30-minute qigong training.

Stroke

In a 30-year study of patients who had suffered a stroke, those who

practised qigong had a 50 percent reduction in death from any cause including stroke, as well as stroke-related illness.

Fibromyalgia

Several studies, including those conducted by Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia, showed practising qigong positively affected the level of pain, sleep, and both physical and mental function among most fibromyalgia patients.

Menopause

According to the US National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, a 2010 review of 21 studies suggested mind/body practices such as qigong may reduce common menopausal symptoms including “frequency and intensity of hot flashes, sleep and mood disturbances, stress, and muscle and joint pain.”

Arthritis

Several small studies have shown that qigong can improve joint pain, stiffness, and overall physical functioning among adults with arthritis. A recent Canadian study that focused on 80 children with juvenile idiopathic arthritis found that a 12-week program of qigong led to improvements in confidence, balance, and overall physical abilities.

Psychological well-being

Promising evidence links qigong practice to a decrease in depressive symptoms, stress, anxiety, and mood disturbances among patients suffering from chronic conditions.

Balance, flexibility, and motor skills

Qigong has long been used as a way for seniors to improve balance and flexibility and decrease the risk

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FINDING A QIGONG INSTRUCTOR

There are many ways to find a qigong instructor, depending on your reason for pursuing this activity.

- > For specific medical problems, contact local or national organizations. Check out hospitals, clinics, and conventional wellness centres that now offer qigong classes as part of their alternative therapeutic and lifestyle treatments. Try a traditional Chinese medicine centre.
- > For seniors, check out local seniors' directories.
- > For general interest, contact local qigong, recreation, or fitness centres, or ask friends and co-workers for recommendations.
- > Buy DVDs or borrow them from your local library.
- > Search online for qigong instructors in your area.

There is currently no standardized training or licensing process for qigong instructors, and their knowledge and competency can vary. Ask to observe or take a class to see if the style of teaching fits your needs and discuss any health or fitness concerns you have.

of falling. New research indicates qigong massage can improve motor skills in young children with cerebral palsy and Down syndrome.

BEGINNING QIGONG PRACTICE

Movements in qigong are rhythmic and gentle, which make them easily adaptable for all ages, from children up to the elderly. They can be performed standing or seated.

As with all forms of exercise, know your body and your limits. A brief warm-up, either at home or before a class, can help prevent muscle strain. Do not do qigong immediately after eating or if you're extremely tired or have an infection.

Talk to your health care practitioner before starting qigong if you

- > are older
- > have an existing health condition
- > are pregnant
- > suffer from dizziness or light-headedness due to taking medication
- > have joint problems or severe osteoporosis
- > have not exercised or been active in a long time

Qigong classes often last an hour and teachers suggest daily practice, either at home or in a class, to get the most benefit. **a**

Harriet Cooper practises qigong for her body and mind.