

氣功 Qigong

An exercise of the strong, silent type



Tribune photo by Zbigniew Bzdak

Qigong teacher Gary J. Clyman says learning how to move "qi," or energy, in the body is 30 percent physical and 70 percent mental.

By Bob Condor  Tribune staff reporter

By self-admission, Nate Davison was once the prototypical Angry Young Man.

"I was so angry and full of rage that I would punch walls," said Davison, 28, of Barrington. "I mean, punch a hole right through."

Davison seemed a prime candidate for a martial arts discipline. But he picked one, qigong, not known for its punching, kicking or screaming. His daily qigong practice helped him use his head rather than literally bang it into walls.

Qigong (pronounced "chee-gung") is a centuries-old Chinese healing art that Americans are rediscovering. Some upscale health clubs and spas have added classes, and companies such as Prudential Financial and Mattel are offering qigong workshops for employees.

Even golfers, including some competing in Sunday's final round of the U.S. Open at local Olympia Fields, are exploring the possibilities on strength of a rumor that Tiger Woods practiced qigong as a child.

Qigong is appearing on exercise class schedules in New York and Los Angeles clubs, which, per usual, means that Chicagoans likely will follow. For instance,

Sports Club/LA offers "SynerChi Sculpt," a class that combines qigong, yoga and weight lifting.

"It's not just about the trophy body anymore," said Norris Tomlinson, who supervises exercise programs for the nearly 400 Bally Total Fitness clubs across the country.

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It's 'chee,' not 'qwee'

The word "qigong" is peculiar enough to make one wonder if this form of physical activity can become popular. It can be difficult to get enthusiastic about something you can't pronounce.

☛ To eliminate such obstacles, here's a quick primer, compliments of all things "Q":

☛ "Qi" is pronounced "chee" and means energy, vital force or breath of life. It is sometimes spelled "chi."

☛ "Gong" is pronounced "gung" (calling it "kung" seems to be acceptable but definitely not "gong"). It translates to practice, skill or mastery. What you are practicing is self-discipline.

☛ To impress your friends, you can casually mention that qigong once was closely guarded from commoners by Chinese elites. It was later forbidden during the Cultural Revolution, and a recent form has been suspected as a religious cult by the current regime.

—B.C.

QIGONG: Practice can inspire a new life

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Some of us might better recognize the martial art as tai chi ("tie-chee"), though there is a distinction.

Qigong is a series of what appear to be simple deep-breathing exercises and subtle movements, such as flexing torso muscles.

Tai chi could be called a subset of qigong. Tai chi's gentle, flowing exercises are part of the large number of qigong movements that are prescribed by Chinese traditional medicine practices to "move" someone's "qi," or energy.

Tai chi is a sort of introduction to qigong taught at many health clubs and fitness centers. The East Bank Club in Chicago offers traditional tai chi and a tai chi stretch class.

Qigong, despite its outward similarity to sitting or standing meditation, is more intense and exhausting for body and mind. Its deep-breathing component is much more than a matter of inhaling and exhaling air.

Breathing with purpose

"A deep breath alone will not bring you more oxygen," said Roger Jahnke, an osteopathic physician based in Santa Barbara, Calif., and author of "The Healing Promise of Qi" (McGraw-Hill/Contemporary Books, \$24.95). "You must get yourself into a state of relaxation to benefit from deeper, more purposeful breathing."

Make no mistake. The muscular movements of qigong, such as squeezing and releasing the sphincter muscle (which controls urine flow), are demanding. Qigong students routinely work up a river of sweat.

The mental component requires total focus, but qigong fans say the workouts result in feeling more clear and less stressed out.

Jahnke said qigong students learn to get into such relaxation states within seconds for numerous mini-breaks. The theory is that you are moving life energy throughout your body.

The discipline creates body awareness. That makes it different from many popular forms of exercise, which allow for TV viewing, reading or socializing.

"We are definitely seeing a bigger interest in the martial arts than we have in quite a while," said Nancy Burrows, director of exercise programs at the East Bank Club. "Movies like 'The Matrix' motivate people."

Nonetheless, Burrows said East Bank Club members are more inclined to attend tai chi classes (especially the stretching variation) than qigong, not currently on the schedule.

"It's a tougher discipline of learning," she explained.

Burrows said the same phenomenon occurs with yoga. People might take a class for gentle movement and stretching. Then as a yoga practice intensifies, members realize "it's one of the hardest activities."



Tribune photos by Zbigniew Bzdak

The "condensing breath" movement is intended to pull the energy into the body's core. Imagine sucking the air into your inner "stick man," said qigong teacher Gary J. Clyman (pictured).



"Freestyle energy circulation" can be used to bolster stamina. Feet planted wide and solid, you pull, sweep or cradle "qi" from one side of the body to the other.

Burrows, like others who spot exercise trends for a living, hears a distant but advancing drumbeat for qigong. The mind-body aspect of the workout appeals to anyone who is burned out on, say, running or power lifting.

According to the Chinese belief system, qi is naturally occurring energy or life force (some call it "bioenergy") within the body. The act of cultivating, refining or mobilizing this life force for healing purposes is called "qigong." The mind guides the body's qi.

"We incorporate qigong into a number of our martial arts classes," said Tomlinson. "Members are more educated about knowing they need a combination of activities to be fit and well. I recommend people combine qigong with some cardiovascular and strength workouts [lifting weights, yoga or Pilates] each week."

Results can be dramatic, especially for the mind and quality of life.

Escaping a dead end

Davison started his qigong practice five years ago. Within weeks, he quit a dead-end warehouse job to pursue his lifelong love of music. He now plays regularly with blues, jazz and rock bands while teaching guitar to a steady list of clients.

On Thursday nights he teaches qigong class ("I tend to attract

people who are 20-somethings") at the Tiger Kyuki-DO martial arts school in Barrington.

"Once I understood the parallels between playing guitar and qigong, I took to it," said Davison, who has been playing music since age 12. "There are the same rigorous training and repetitions."

Davison encourages newcomers to be patient, not always a staple in the American mindset.

"It takes time to understand how the qi moves in your body," Davison said. "If you stick with it, you will feel it. Then you see the positive changes it can create in your life."

Gary J. Clyman is a 51-year-old qigong teacher who tutors Davison along with thousands of others who have attended his workshops, bought his video and book or scheduled private lessons since 1983 (check out www.chikung.com). He said it is not uncommon for his students to experience a first few weeks of frustration once they commit to a qigong practice.

"People start moving the energy around," said Clyman, who first learned qigong in 1978. "They realize they aren't happy. They figure out ways to rework their marriage and or ask for a raise."

As a master teacher, he sees his role as both moving energy himself in a person's body and teaching the student to do it on

his or her own. The goal is moving the internal energy to create internal power.

"I call it flexing the muscle of your will," Clyman said. "Learning to move energy around is about 30 percent physical and 70 percent mental."

For example, one client who talked about selling her condominium and moving to Costa Rica did just that within six weeks of following Clyman's qigong practice.

Clyman said he routinely "fixes marriages" and "helps people project the desired results of a business meeting" through recirculated qi.

Clyman's client list includes the expected doctors, lawyers and business consultants. But he also works with security guards and financial traders.

In fact, his trader clientele was booming in the late 1980s to the point that one firm provided an office for him to see traders during work breaks.

"There was a period when that's all I was doing," Clyman recalled.

A reinvigorated life

Clyman's qigong lessons awaken a person's sense of "deservingness." He characterizes the workout routine as much more than a way to sweat off pounds or reduce stress.

"When you practice qigong, you stop slouching off, you stop taking what's less, you stop pro-

crastinating, you stop having bad relationships," Clyman said.

Such dividends require persistence, he said. His qigong routine that can be performed at home in a 6-foot-square space gradually engages students in 28 individual movements.

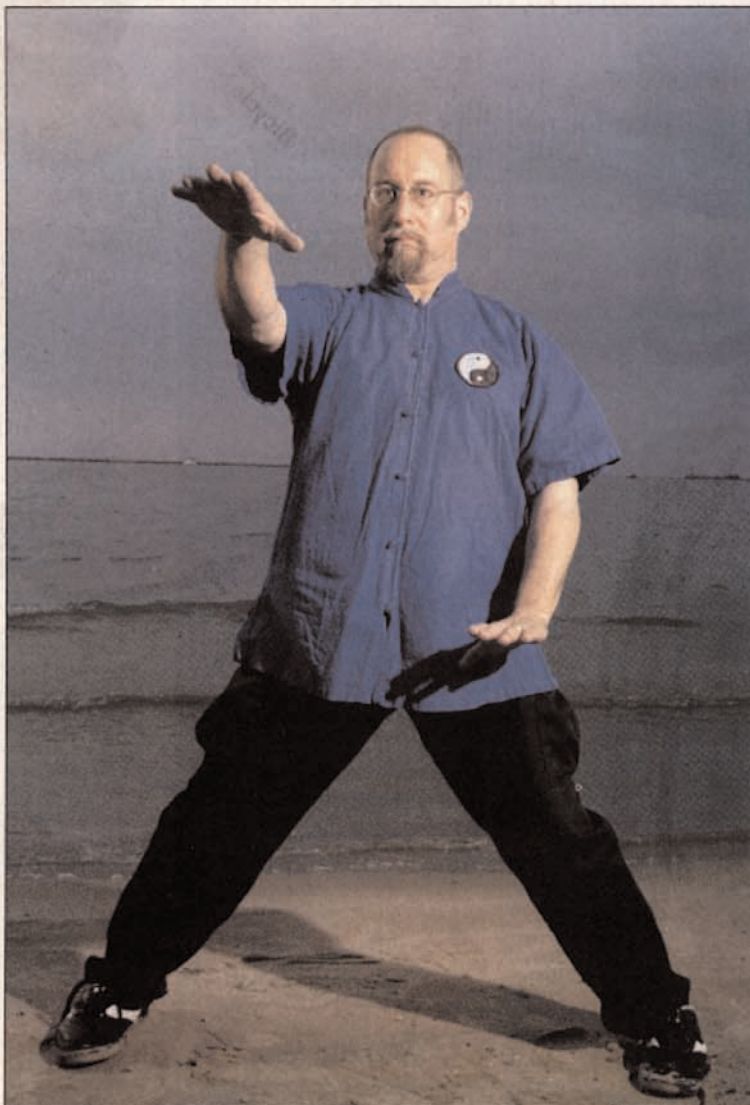
"We start with low repetitions, then build word by word, sentence by sentence," Clyman said.

The qigong master teacher eschews the self-massage segment of ancient Chinese qigong teachings ("it's just a bunch of lip rubbing and ear pulling") but acknowledges that some Americans will pursue qigong in years ahead to feel calmer and more grounded.

"There are many different flavors and levels of qigong and tai chi," Clyman said. "My suggestion is you pick a simple series of exercises to get started."

Laughing, Clyman said he "thought the wave was then" during his heyday of training up to 100 traders in the late 1980s. Yet his phone and Internet site have been noticeably busier in the last few months. He will be airing an infomercial on local stations in the coming weeks.

"Something is happening," Clyman said. "People are going past wanting muscle strength and weight loss and a better appearance. They are looking for a new wave of anti-aging and energetics."



The "single whip" exercise is more than a dancelike move. Qigong students use it to press energy downward with one palm and up into the other side of the body.