

Tai Chi/Qigong and Aging

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Deveron Long

Every week my 77 year-old mother looks more and more frail. A year ago when I brought her back from her home in Nevada after her husband's death, she weighed a frightening 89 pounds. Today she weighs 102, and yet she looks even more unsteady on her feet than before. I monitor her food intake as much as I can from my home 3 blocks away, and I encourage her to garden and walk with me when the weather permits. But lately she complains that she can't find the energy to walk as much as she used to, and I am nervous that she will begin to fall in this new phase of unsteadiness. She is concerned about her osteoporosis because her Nevada physician removed her from calcium supplements due to the increased risk of calcifications in her body. I will leave this determination up to her new physician, but I am of the opinion that it is time to intervene with some alternative therapy to increase her bone density, muscle strength, and to improve her overall balance and sense of wellbeing. This therapy is Tai Chi/Qigong.

Tai Chi, an ancient Chinese practice of moving Qi, vital energy or life force, dates back nearly 5,000 years (Kligler, p. 246). Kligler further explains that Qi "emanates through energy pathways or meridians, which cover the body like a network system" (p. 246). Tai Chi employs breathing and movement techniques that affect the flow of Qi energy. According to Knaster (1996), Tai Chi is based on Taoist principles that "life is a balance between the opposite forces of yin and yang, health is the unimpeded flow of chi, and the ideal is harmony with nature and our fellow human beings" (p. 335). This philosophy resonates with me completely, as do the graceful motions performed as an uninterrupted flow.

Tai Chi long form consists of a series of 108 postures with evocative names such as White Crane Spreads Its Wings, Parting Wild Horse's Mane, and Waving Hands in Clouds (Knaster, p. 336). The short form consists of 37 postures; however, I am blessed to have discovered Tai Chi for Busy People, a modified form that consists of "The Infinite Nine" postures. When put together these postures become a meditative dance that is easy to learn and takes only five minutes to perform. Qigong is even easier as the moves are not as formalized as those in Tai Chi—and they can be performed sitting down for those with physical challenges.

When Tai Chi is performed as it is intended—with "calmness, clarity, equilibrium, and awareness"—the forms are said to be like a "never-ending river" (Knaster, p. 336). From my experience with Tai Chi over the past four months, the metaphor of the river perfectly captures the felt sensations. The postures are designed around a centered body stance that builds core strength and encourages a sense of grounding. Knaster eloquently explains the interplay of the yin and yang flow of opposites when the body weight is constantly being shifted from one leg to another, when muscles contract and release, when the trunk of the body is moving in a twisted

opposition to the lower half of the body, and when arms raise and lower and move side to side (p. 336).

For me there is a meditative satisfaction to Tai Chi that leads to stress reduction and an overall sense of wellbeing. Perhaps more importantly, the physical engagement of the body in this practice has also been shown to “enhance physical fitness in older adults and improve postural stability” (Kligler, p. 247). Kligler adds, “Chinese studies report that tai chi practitioners experience less osteoporosis and spinal deformity, better spinal flexibility, greater vital capacity, lower resting blood pressure, and better cardiovascular response to exercise than do nonpractitioners” (p. 835). In addition to improving joint flexibility in the knees and shoulders of participants in a study, “tai chi training substantially reduced the rate of falls by 47.5% after 4 months follow-up” (Kligler, p. 836).

I experienced for myself a substantial improvement in balance and core strength after only two months of Tai Chi practice for 5-10 minutes per day, so I am eager to initiate a simplified practice of Qigong for my mother. Because she has already been diagnosed with osteoporosis, she is more susceptible to broken bones from simple falls. Tai Chi may help her build core strength and improve balance. Even this would be a great relief for me. If Tai Chi or Qigong can improve her joint function and flexibility, reduce stiffness from arthritis, increase circulation and range of motion, it will be a great relief for her. In addition to the health benefits, Tai Chi will also provide emotional benefits from the time we spend practicing together.

References

- Kligler, B. & Lee, R. (Eds.) (2004). *Integrative medicine: Principles for practice*. New York: McGraw-Hill Companies.
- Knaster, M. (1996). *Discovering the body's wisdom*. New York: Bantam Books.