

Understanding the Channels through Experience

Chinese exercises appeal to many beyond our profession. Their wide variety can attract people with many different interests. Young people appreciate the physical discipline of learning a martial art, and the self-esteem one gains in strengthening and training the body. These benefits certainly extend to adults, and as people mature some are drawn to the more sublime pleasures and benefits of internal martial arts such as *taijiquan*, and the wide variety of *qigong* exercises.

Qigong practice conveys health benefits by enhancing the flow of vital process. Yet, valuable as all these exercises are for any embodied spirit, they have particular importance for acupuncturists. While we can certainly teach them to patients to help them support their own healing, *qigong* practice has significance far beyond directly improving the health of a person practicing it. Acupuncture is a particularly kinesthetic healing art, and channels are experiential phenomena. Regular *qigong* practice can:

- cultivate the flow of *qi*, and thus enhances the effectiveness of a practitioner's treatments through direct resonance
- increase sensitivity in feeling, and thus somatically understanding, the flow of *qi* to assist practitioners in both diagnosis and treatment
- develop a deeper understanding of the channels to enrich the theoretical frameworks one uses to develop treatment strategies.

The name “*qigong*” literally means to “work the *qi*.” There are many types of *qigong*, based upon the focus and purpose of that work or cultivation. Some *qigong* exercises emphasize strengthening the physical body, and thus the flow of *qi*. Others emphasize paying careful attention to slow rhythmic movements to identify habitual holding patterns (attachments), and facilitating flow through releasing blockages. This differentiation is sometimes characterized as a distinction between “external” and “internal” exercises. Like many other aspects of *yang* and *yin* in life, these are not truly separate categories, but a standard of comparison between specific exercise traditions.

While this distinction between internal and external exercises is important, they are not actually separate. The most externally oriented ones rely upon and create internal transformations. Internal arts facilitate the flow of *qi*, thus they strengthen the body even while engaging minimal physical exercise. Many *qigong* practices can facilitate one in kinesthetically understanding the flow of *qi*, thus enhancing both diagnosis and treatment.

Cultivating *qi* relies on careful attention, and refining focus and intension. *Qigong* brings together the three treasures of life, thus enhances the ongoing process of embodiment through better knowing one's being.

1. *Jing* (essence) conveys physicality to the individual, including the capacity to generate physical humors. Those humors are vital to ongoing physiology, and they suspend unresolved conflict, which accumulates to form insidious pathologies. It is the essential source of *yin*.
2. *Qi* conveys vital process, which sustains the physical body. It provides clarity of direction to the animating force.
3. An individuated *shen* (spirit) animates the physical body. It initiates the activation that leads to all movement. It is the essential source of *yang*.

Some of the spirit's movements are free and volitional, as the individual seeks experiences and interactions to make life meaningful. Others are vital and compelled by previous choices. Once either experiences or physical food and drink have been internalized, they must be processed. The results of that process are either expelled, integrated into the being, or suspended and stored for final disposition later.

Partial blockages of *qi* distort vital functions, and distract the being from effectively maintaining them. External exercises implement the *Nanjing* approach, which considers deficiencies of flow the foundation of pathology. That approach to therapy and *qigong* stimulates the embodied spirit to generate more *qi* to enhance flow through any blocks. It treats the deficiency of flow (*qi*) first, and only later any remaining excesses.

Internal arts focus on discerning and discriminating the locations of factors blocking the smooth flow of *qi*. That approach carefully observes an individual's habituated, and generally unconscious, attachments and projections. Each person brings these to every experience, and they form the foundation of all holding and struggle in life. Most internal practices follow *Neijing* in focusing on the local excesses that impede the free flow of *qi*, and the accumulations that form around them to manifest in overt imbalances of the *zangfu*. After these (partial) blocks have been cleared, the individual's intrinsic responsiveness is restored, and *qi* naturally flows to where it had been deficient. This approach first unblocks the local excesses, then tonifies any remaining deficiencies.

While the two great classics of Chinese medicine concentrate on different aspects of disrupted vital flow, they both recognize the accumulated residue of incomplete vital process as the foundation of many diseases. Many manifest imbalances of the *zangfu* result from the insidious accumulation of stagnating factors. While they are insufficient to cause acute disease, they accumulate over time. Eventually the being's capacity to suspend them is consumed, and they express as overt disease.

Life relies on movement, which is characterized by rhythm. Flow without any blocking may generate a profound sense of ease and balance, but who among us has achieved such a sublime state? Balanced behavior does not imply that an individual has realized this ideal. Individually embodied spirits have the capacity to suspend, and thus maintain in a

dormant state, unresolved conflicts and struggles. This unfulfilled residue of experience accumulates until the being is no longer willing or able to devote physical humors to suspending it. At that point, blockages emerge into the primary channels.

Treating manifest imbalances can only allow the practitioner to manage the expression of distress. Cure results from resolving the underlying factors that are distracting, constricting or impeding the vital flow of *qi*. While both classics teach strategies for treating these accumulations, *Neijing* has a particularly rich theoretical framework for understanding, differentiating, and treating them. These are the divergent channels, the (longitudinal) *luo* vessels, and among the eight extraordinary vessels, especially the *daimai* (belt vessel).

Lingshu (chap. 10) notes that among the systems of channels and vessels, only the *luo* are visible. The divergent channels are much more challenging to identify and comprehend. Neo-natal *Daoyin* is an internal practice particularly well suited for increasing one's knowledge and understanding of the divergent channels and several of the extraordinary vessels, including the *daimai*.

Most of these simple exercises are done while a person is lying comfortably on a pad. This position reduces the impact of gravity, and allows the embodied spirit to work more easily with habituated postures, both physical and metaphorical. Habituated patterns of holding and activation lay at the core of an individual's experience, and are conveyed through the divergent channels. Learning and practicing neo-natal *Daoyin* can help practitioners understand the fundamental role these "secondary" vessels serve in life.

For more information about neo-natal *Daoyin*, and a schedule of upcoming workshop intensives, see www.CCMforHealing.com. Contact me through the website to schedule a neo-natal *Daoyin* intensive or other seminars near you.