



Qigong For Beginners: How an Ancient Chinese Practice Can Improve Your Health

By Megan Edwards
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Curious about cultivating a mindfulness practice that isn't quite as rigorous as [yoga](#)? Qigong (pronounced "chee-gong") may be the modality for you. This ancient Chinese art combines intentional breath, gentle movement, and meditation to focus the mind, promote relaxation, and improve mobility.

While qigong's origins are deeply rooted in traditional Chinese medicine—which also encompasses acupuncture and herbal remedies for ailments—its popularity has grown far outside the medical field. Today, qigong is practiced by people of all backgrounds around the world and is particularly popular among elderly populations due to its reputation for improving balance, mobility, and mood.

This guide to qigong for beginner's gives you a thorough look at what it's like to practice qigong, an overview of its philosophical and spiritual underpinnings, and a science-backed examination of how it can boost your health.

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What Are the Origins of Qigong?

The primary intent of a qigong practice is quite literally expressed in the two Chinese characters that make up the word: "Qi" translates to "lifeforce energy," while "gong" means "to skillfully cultivate." Together, qigong is the practice of cultivating and honing your lifeforce energy. If you're a yoga practitioner, qi is similar to the concept of prana, which is seen as the spiritual energetic current that flows through all things. Both traditions use specific breathing and movement techniques to encourage a strong "flow" of energy to support a healthy body, mind, and heart.

[Qigong originated in China](#) around 2146 B.C. and was heavily influenced by Daoist philosophy, particularly the concept that harmony with nature is of the utmost importance. The first physical manifestation of qigong began as a series of exercises that imitated the movements of animals. These exercises connected people to their environment, honored the natural world, and helped ease an aching body after a long day of work.

"Nature influences and informs a lot of the qigong practices," explains Martha Blane, a Zhineng qigong teacher at [Qigong For Life](#), who's studied the practice for 20 years. "In one exercise you may be moving like a bird, so your focus will be completely enveloped in embodying this image of the bird's wings and feeling that lightness in your body."

Qigong later incorporated an understanding of the body's energy meridians used in acupuncture to help stimulate certain organs or release stagnant energy that was believed to cause sickness. As qigong evolved over the centuries, it underwent hundreds of different iterations that have led to the many different styles practiced today. While nuances abound in qigong, most practices fall into one of three categories: medical qigong (which focuses on improving your overall health and removing disease, typically only done by a medical professional), martial qigong (which focuses on developing strength and agility, such as tai chi), and spiritual qigong (which focuses on cultivating inner awareness).

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Traditional Chinese medicine holds that a person is most healthy when their qi, or life force energy, is abundant and flowing. Qi can be impaired by unhealthy foods, emotional distress, a bad home or work environment, or overworking/underworking the body. The combination of intentional breathing, movement, and meditation in qigong is meant to restore homeostasis to your qi.

“As you practice more and more you end up living in a qigong state, which is the state of feeling connected, centered, and grounded,” says Blane. “It’s like you’re floating down the middle of a river, not being drawn to one side or the other. Your emotions stay more balanced and harmonized.”

What Are the Main Components of a Qigong Practice?

Blane explains that there are four main elements that function as the building blocks of most qigong practices. Together, they allow the body and mind to drop into the present moment and cultivate a more compassionate, connected, and conscious relationship with the self.

1. Intention

To reap the full benefits of qigong, it’s important to clear the mind of distractions before you start moving and breathing. It’s normal for the mind to stray throughout your practice, but continually and gently bringing your focus back to the sensations in your body and quality of your energy will turn each session into a moving meditation.

2. Breath

Deep, [diaphragmatic breaths](#) are a crucial component of all qigong exercises. Many exercises encourage a pattern of slow inhales through the nose and elongated exhales through the mouth. This breath pattern helps activate the parasympathetic nervous system, which calms the mind and relaxes the body. Actively engaging your breath is believed to help circulate qi through the energetic meridians of your body and help open up blockages or stagnation that are preventing balance.

3. Dantian (energy centers)

In qigong philosophy, the body holds three primary energy centers called dantian. They are believed to hold concentrated amounts of qi, which can be honed and strengthened by bringing sustained attention, movement, and breath to each energy center.

- The lower dantian is located below the belly button and is said to hold jing, a type of qi that is believed to be a person’s genetic essence, the energy source from which our bodies grow and develop from the time of conception.
- The middle dantian is located in the center of the chest and is considered the home of qi, which nourishes and supports the organs through all the things we consume, such as food and media.
- The upper dantian is related to the third eye and corresponds to a universal spiritual energy called shen, which is said to help us think clearly, make wise decisions, and act justly. Many qigong practices focus on cultivating strength in all three energy centers, starting from the bottom and moving upward, to create a healthy flow of energy from the bottom up.

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4. Movement

Qigong can be both a singular exercise and a connected pattern of movements. If you only have five minutes in the morning, you can repeat a single technique several times and still feel the benefits. If you take a full class, you’ll learn many different movements that are often purposely interlinked to encourage a specific physical or energetic benefit.

While this might sound complicated, all these foundational concepts are intended to move you toward one goal: a state of

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greater calm and clarity. “The main two concepts I teach are ‘relax’ and ‘expand your mind,’” says Blane. “We work on relaxing the body, heart, and mind to let go of all the chatter. We don’t aim for an empty mind but instead a state of being where you can just watch your thoughts without becoming them. As you relax, then you can expand your awareness outward and see things clearly. That’s the qigong state—being simultaneously relaxed and expansive.”

Qigong vs. Tai Chi: What Is the Difference?

Qigong is the precursor to tai chi and can be seen as the great-grandmother of all other practices that work with cultivating qi, or life force energy. Tai chi is included under the larger umbrella of qigong because it mixes traditional energy control techniques with martial arts. More recently, [tai chi has evolved](#) to be less about defensive skills and more of a fluid movement practice that develops flexibility, balance, stamina, and control in the pursuit of better health. Qigong is often more static than tai chi in the sense that the exercises don’t necessarily flow into a sequence of repetitive movements. But the largest difference lies in the original purpose: While tai chi is traditionally structured as a protective martial art, qigong does not emphasize combat.

Is Qigong Safe to Practice?

Qigong is a very gentle exercise that is safe to practice and has very few contraindications. However, people who have trouble balancing or are at risk of falling may want to practice a seated version of the exercises, since a moderate level of coordination and muscle engagement are required to move through the postures. As always, you should consult your doctor before starting any new exercise routine.

“There is only one type of person who should not do qigong,” says Blane. “And that’s a person who isn’t open to the experience. If they’re going to walk into class with a critical mind, they shouldn’t be there. It won’t do any harm of course, but they likely won’t see the benefits.”

What Are the Health Benefits of Qigong?

Since its inception more than two millennia ago, practitioners have credited qigong with aiding many different physical and mental ailments, but only recently has modern science looked at the claims. While there is still more research to be done, a significant number of peer-reviewed studies show positive health outcomes among people who regularly practice it. Let’s take a look at some of the most common health conditions it’s been shown to improve.

Stress, Anxiety, and Depression

Several research reviews, including a [2021 meta-analysis](#) of the psychological impact of qigong on adolescents, have found correlations between a regular qigong practice and improved mental health, although researchers emphasize the need for larger and more methodologically rigorous studies. A [review of 15 studies from 2013](#) concluded that depression and [overall quality of life](#) were the two strongest areas of improvement, and a [2011 randomized controlled trial](#) found qigong to be comparable with cognitive behavioral therapy for reducing symptoms of clinical depression. Additionally, a [2020 study](#) found patients with a history of drug abuse reported a significant decrease in anxiety symptoms after engaging in a qigong practice, and it was found to be as effective as their standard treatment for depression.

Sleep

In a [2016 randomized controlled trial](#), qigong improved sleep duration, sleep efficiency, and mental health among a group of cognitively impaired older adults who struggled with insomnia. The experimental group participated in two months of regular qigong classes, and researchers found that the positive impacts on sleep persisted even four months after participants stopped practicing qigong. A [2018 study](#) found that Baduanjin qigong (one of the most common branches of qigong) relieved musculoskeletal pain in adults with chronic illness, which in turn lessened their insomnia symptoms.

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Parkinson's Disease

A [2020 meta-analysis](#) found that a consistent qigong practice significantly improved the motor symptoms, walking ability, and balance of people with Parkinson's when compared with a control group of Parkinson's patients who did not partake in qigong. A [study from 2022](#) found that qigong helped increase the range of motion in patients' lower limbs and may be indicated as a non-pharmacological intervention for Parkinson's.

Pain Relief

A [2018 study](#) found qigong to be effective for relieving chronic neck pain, although not necessarily more effective than traditional exercise therapies. The researchers noted that the low cost and relative ease of practicing qigong at home make it a good option for those managing chronic pain. A [2020 analysis](#) reported that qigong offered significant improvements in pain, stiffness, and physical function for patients dealing with knee osteoarthritis, although the study authors noted that further research is needed to fully assess the impact.

Balance and Coordination

A [2020 study](#) monitored a 12-week qigong class for a group of nearly 100 older adults and saw significant improvement in their balance and gait at the conclusion of the course, especially among participants in their 60s and 70s.

Cardiovascular Health

A [2020 analysis](#) of several randomized control trials of patients managing chronic heart failure found that tai chi and qigong practices provided superior improvements in recovery and rehabilitation compared with patients who only practiced general exercise. Researchers concluded that qigong is a promising supplemental therapy to improve heart health.

Hypertension

A [2021 review](#) looked at data from more than 350 patients and discovered that their blood pressure reduced significantly after a qigong practice compared with a control group that did not engage in qigong. Another 2021 study showed that compared with no exercise, qigong had significant positive effects on both systolic and diastolic blood pressure, and the researchers posited that it would have an even greater effect if the practice was kept up for longer periods of time.

Immune System

Qigong helps reduce psychological and physical stress, which in turn [reduces strain](#) on the immune system. A [2020 meta-analysis](#) found that practicing qigong had beneficial physiological effects on the immune system by reducing inflammation and stimulating immune cell responses.

What Is It Like to Practice Qigong?

The concept of strengthening your lifeforce energy can easily sound abstract, so I took two virtual classes with Blane to feel it in my own body. While I'd never tried qigong before, I'm a yoga teacher and was able to pick up on the similarities (and differences) between the two practices. Here's what it was like to practice qigong as a total beginner.

Class 1: Breath As Medicine

Blane's first class emphasized qigong breathing techniques, much like pranayama exercises you might explore in a yoga class. Before focusing on our breath we warmed up the body and started moving our qi by lightly tapping up and down our limbs,

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twisting our torsos side-to-side, and moving our arms in a circular motion that felt like choreography from a kung fu movie. After this gentle awakening of the physical body, we sat down to focus on different breathing techniques. One involved alternate-nostril breathing to promote calm, while another included short and sharp bursts of inhaled and exhaled breaths to increase our alertness. In between each breathwork round I was instructed to massage my head with sweeping motions that started at my eyebrows and moved up and over my scalp. (This looked like when a cat or a rabbit cleans its head with its paws.)

Breathing deeply from my diaphragm for nearly 40 minutes was incredibly calming, and my prior knowledge of yogic pranayama practices helped me stay focused. My mind and body felt clear and mellow after class, and my brain, which can often be full of racing thoughts, was much calmer for a few hours after the practice.

Class 2: Finding Balance

The second class was much more movement-based and focused on the theme of balance. Blane guided us through a seated opening meditation that left my entire body feeling pliable and wiggly. It was mid-February, and Blane spoke to us about the changing of the seasons from winter to spring. She talked about how the continual cycles of nature teach us to cultivate the balance and flexibility to flow from one chapter of life to the next.

After grounding into our bodies with a meditation, we stood up to open the energy meridians in our bodies by tapping on different acupressure points. This left me feeling energized and alert, and I could feel a tingling sensation beneath my skin that is similar to how I feel after a few sun salutations in a yoga class. We then moved onto more circular, flowing exercises that closely linked breath to movement. One exercise, called Crane Neck, helped relieve tension in the neck and shoulders that can often build up from working a desk job. Two other exercises engaged our sense of balance by challenging us to stand on one leg as we circled the floating ankle or by transferring our weight onto our tiptoes while our arms moved in choreographed patterns.

Class ended with a standing meditation that involved holding static upright postures for a minute or so each. We then bowed to each other, and the practice was over. I felt ready to jump into a full day of work as soon as it was done. The tightness that can often creep into my body after a night of restless sleep was much alleviated, and any brain fog I woke up with was nonexistent. While I didn't feel as physically stretched out as I do after a yoga class, I knew the goal was to enliven my energy more so than to move my muscles, and Blane's class delivered exactly that.

How Do I Start a Qigong Practice?

Curious to give qigong a try but not ready to invest in a class? Follow along with bite-sized routines through YouTube videos. We've curated a few of our favorite videos that demonstrate qigong for beginners to get you on the right track:

1. How to Feel Great In 10 Minutes - Beginner Qigong Routine

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TAHh8uPjIHU>

2. 7 Minute Qigong Routine - Easy Beginner Practice to Invigorate the Qi

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jMuHg3FF_k

3. 3 Best Qi Gong Exercises for Beginners

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jSJHpL2nT-o&t=120s>

If you decide this is a practice you enjoy, the next step is finding a teacher you can consistently practice with and learn from, so start by Googling qigong classes near you. Daoist temples or organizations often host free or cheap classes, and there are plenty of teachers who provide virtual offerings so you can learn in the comfort of your own home. Be sure to always check a teacher's

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credentials to see where they studied, who has influenced their practice, and what style of qigong they specialize in. The only thing left to do now is maintain a steady practice and observe how qigong impacts your life!