

## Go with the Flow

*Tai chi and qi gong are two gentle practices designed to keep your energy moving.*

In the world of Chinese philosophy, there is a force of nature that flows inside human veins and through the leaves of trees, between the planets and beneath the ocean, holding everything together and making it all work. It is called *qi* (pronounced “chee”). Within the body it journeys through invisible channels called *meridians*. But *qi* can become blocked by stress, illness and injury, which leads to more blockage and illness.

Maintaining the free flow of *qi* is a basic principle of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). Two similar-looking practices, *qi gong* (“chee-gung,” also called *chi kung*) and *tai chi* (“ty-chee,” also called *tai chi chuan*), join acupuncture and herbalism in TCM’s efforts to circulate and balance *qi*. Both employ repetitive movements done in sequences designed to allow the body to heal itself.

### Graceful Focus

Watch two people doing *qi gong* and *tai chi* side by side, and at first you may not be able to tell the difference. Both are meditative practices that use (mostly) slow, graceful movements and controlled breathing to focus the body, breath and mind. Arms float upward and hands push outward, legs bend at the knees and feet take wide steps. As you engage in either practice over time, you cultivate and enhance your *qi*, gradually arriving at greater well-being.

What makes *qi gong* and *tai chi* different? For starters, *qi gong* (*qi* for “life force” and *gong* for “practice”) is much older, having originated between 20,000 and 30,000 years ago. *Tai chi* didn’t come into existence until the 12th century. The term means “grand

Chinese philosophy and martial arts,” says Master Vincent Chu of the Gin Soon Tai Chi Federation in Boston ([www.gstaichi.org](http://www.gstaichi.org)). In *qi gong* “the concentration is on regulating the body, the breathing and the spirit to improve health,” Chu explains, while *tai chi* is concerned with integration of body, *qi*, intent and spirit.

There are thousands of forms of *qi gong*; the general idea behind all of them is to breathe slowly and restfully, using repetitive movements. Many of the movements mimic those associated with everyday life. For example, the practitioner often has to shift weight from one leg to the other, similar to what happens when we walk.

Traditional *tai chi* tends to be more complex; its 108 sequential movements (20 to 40 in the short form) call for the practitioner’s hands and feet to sometimes move in four different directions at once while maintaining a normal rate of breathing. In the last several decades more accessible styles of *tai chi* have developed that tend to resemble *qi gong*.

### Moving Towards Health

According to the Institute of Integral *Qi gong* and *Tai Chi* (IIQTC) in Santa Barbara, California ([www.iiqtc.org](http://www.iiqtc.org)), both *qi gong* and *tai chi* reduce heart rate and blood pressure. Regular practice improves waste elimination and the transport of immune cells through the lymphatic system. “When you practice with a

deep intention and a belief in self-healing, allowing the mind to rest in quiet indifference, you can expect amazing results right away,” says Roger Jahnke, OMD, IIQTC director and author of *The Healer Within* (HarperCollins) and *The Healing Promise of Qi* (McGraw-Hill).

“*Qi gong* and *tai chi* engage the parasympathetic nervous system, calming the body so it can better regulate and regenerate itself,” says Tom Rogers, president of The *Qi gong* Institute in Los Altos, California ([www.qigonginstitute.org](http://www.qigonginstitute.org)).

Not only do *qi gong* and *tai chi* alter your neurochemistry but “science has proved that these practices positively influence your telomeres, which protect your DNA’s chromosomes and cells, slowing the process of aging,” Jahnke says. Both practices dissolve tension and stress. “Depending on your situation, your headaches go away, and your sleep and digestion improve. Additionally, you enjoy more

energy and endurance; and sharper concentration, creativity and intuition,” he adds.

*Qi gong* and *tai chi* also differ in their effects. Practice *qi gong*’s soothing repetition and, even if it’s your first time, it’s likely that you will enter a trance-like state,” says Jahnke. In contrast, *tai chi*’s simultaneously different movements can “sharpen your brain and mind in a very orderly way.”

Jahnke co-authored a study in the *American Journal of Health Promotion* in which *qi gong* and *tai chi* practice was linked to better bone density, immune enhancement, maximization of heart and lung capacities and enhanced physical balance. In other studies *tai chi* has been found to help ease lower back pain, and improve symptoms and quality of life among older men who have benign prostate enlargement (*Arthritis Care Research* 11/11, *Evidence-Based Complementary and Alternative Medicine* 2012 Article 624692).

Which practice you choose depends on personal preference and physical capacity. “*Qi gong* is good for people with physical limitations; you can do it lying down or in a wheelchair,” says Rogers. In either case, it’s a good idea to take lessons so that someone can guide you into doing the exercises correctly, an especially important point in *tai chi*.

No matter which practice you decide to adopt, both *qi gong* and *tai chi* can guide you back to what’s most important in life. Rogers says, “Both bring you closer to our fundamental connection with nature and the planet.”

—Claire Sykes

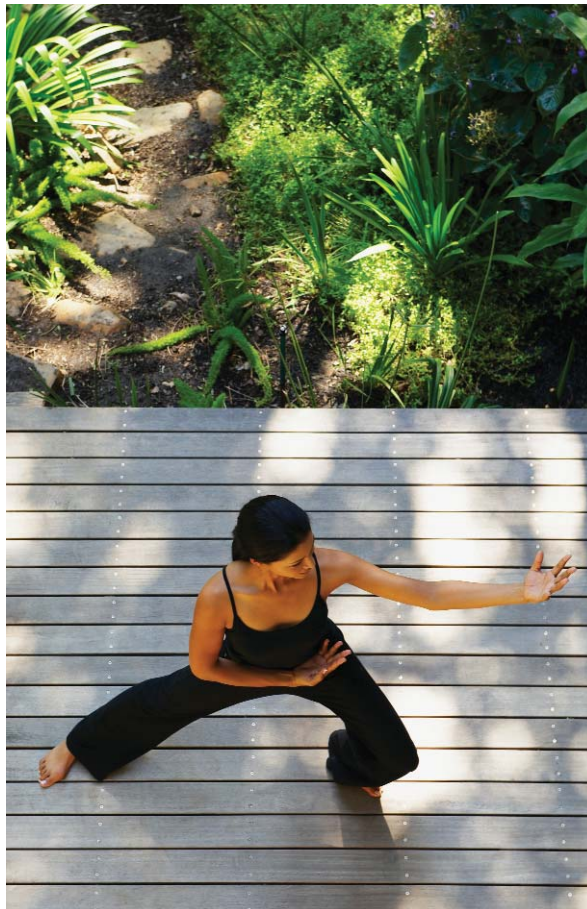


Photo by Peter Frank/Corbis



Do you practice either *qi gong* or *tai chi* and, if so, what changes have you noticed? Let us know by visiting our blog at [www.energytimes.com](http://www.energytimes.com).