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FASHION & STYLE

Exercisers Slow It Down With Qigong

By NORA ISAACS APRIL 5, 2007

CHUNYI LIN remembers the first qigong class he ever taught in the United States. In 1993, he traveled from China as part of a cultural exchange between schools, and was asked to teach at a community center in Inver Grove Heights, Minn.

Only five people showed up.

“Nobody knew of qigong,” said Mr. Lin, 49, a master of the age-old practice, which entails coordinating slow movements with breathing to cultivate the flow of energy, or qi, in a sort of graceful, fluid dance.

Now, he runs a qigong center in Eden Prairie, Minn., called Spring Forest, where he teaches to packed classes of more than 60 students — and workshops nationwide to hundreds more. “Qigong is growing like crazy in the United States in the past few years,” Mr. Lin said. “People want to be more proactive with their health care.”

The face of exercise is changing in America. Instead of relentlessly pursuing a sculptured physique, people are chasing longevity, stress reduction and improved health through mind-body practices like qigong.

“The realm of working out has shifted from people just wanting to build bulk and lean, toned muscles to them understanding that the inner health of the body is just

as important as the outer health,” said Bernard Shannon, a medical qigong therapist who works one on one with clients and sits on the board of the National Qigong Association, a trade group.

This vanguard of wellness-motivated exercisers prefers a regimen that encourages self-awareness to one with a high calorie burn.

“People want to get back to a simpler time,” said Ted J. Cibik, a medical qigong therapist and a certified health and fitness instructor, whose patients include athletes. “They want to find something they can practice that doesn’t take a lot of apparatus, allows them to deal with their stress, and gives them a good physical workout in the sense that it gets them moving.”

It wasn’t until recently that the ancient, gentle practice of qigong caught the attention of even the most sophisticated American exercisers.

The reasons vary. Mindful yoga has acclimated people to Eastern practices. Rising health care costs and expensive prescriptions have led people to look for alternative ways to feel vital. And an influx of qigong teachers from China has paved the way for new generations of teachers and students.

“There is a whole community of people who are intrigued by the whole mind-body shift happening in clubs, gyms and personal training centers who are now pushing these ancient arts,” Mr. Cibik said.

It’s taken decades for qigong — which is an umbrella term for numerous energy-based practices, including tai chi — to spread across the United States, in part because there weren’t enough instructors. That started changing in the 1980s and ’90s, when a handful came from China. Then in the late ’90s, after the Communist party made most forms of qigong illegal and cracked down on members of the Falun Gong spiritual movement, who practice a form of qigong, an influx of teachers immigrated to this country.

“Many great masters have left China,” said Jampa Stewart, the director of Healing Tao Institute, a qigong center in Austin, Tex., and as a result, qigong education has improved in the United States.

Today's qigong masters — “master” being an ambiguous title that requires no specific training — crisscross the country teaching their art, far beyond large cities to places like Heavenly Mountain, a wilderness retreat in North Carolina, where the Thailand-based Mantak Chia will hold six days of workshops this summer. This year, Yang, Jwing-Ming, a qigong expert, will travel to Boston and Chicago, but also to suburbs like Roswell, Ga., and more-rural towns like Glen Garden, N.J.

A decade ago, most Westerners didn't know how to pronounce qigong (CHEE-kung). Plenty still don't, but that hasn't stopped them from attending classes at YMCAs, gyms, medical centers and college campuses. Roughly 950,000 American adults have practiced qigong in their lifetime, according to a study conducted in 2002 by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and released in 2004 by the C.D.C. and the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine.

The yoga boom has made mind-body exercise more run of the mill. “Yoga has now become acceptable,” said Judith Hanson Lasater, a yoga teacher since 1971 who now teaches restorative yoga, a form that encourages relaxation. “Qigong is a little further away, but yoga has opened the door.”

Because some forms of yoga are downright strenuous, qigong appeals to yogis tired of the mat race. “I went to power-yoga studios and practiced in heated rooms crammed with people's mats, shoved over each other,” said Kyle Burton, 27, from Los Angeles. “But once I was introduced to qigong and learned the difference between a muscle-based workout versus an energetic-based practice, I switched.”

Practitioners say that qigong helps alleviate joint and muscle aches, increases energy and deepens their breathing. “It's taken my body, mind and spirit to a completely new level,” said Shelley Marks, 46, a talent manager living in Los Angeles who started qigong after showing early signs of rheumatoid arthritis. “It's created a very peaceful feeling,” she said, and her inflammation and pain have diminished.

Jackie Close, 31, a lifelong athlete from Seattle, never thought she would skip the gym for her fix of cardio machines and weightlifting. But after a knee injury left her sidelined, she embraced qigong because it grounded her emotionally and helped her knee heal. “I've actually put qigong over the gym, which is a first in my life,” Ms.

Close said. "I know it's not necessarily getting the heart rate up, but it has other effects."

This slow-paced practice, which can look like gliding through water, has just a few simple rules. Always move from the center. Don't lock or bend the legs deeply. Arms remain neither limp nor rigid. So anyone can pick it up.

Scott Conley, 83, and his wife, Georganne, 77, both have coronary stents and suffer from epilepsy but enjoy qigong. "It's very easy for me to digest the movements," said Mrs. Conley, who recently took a class at the Osher Center for Integrative Medicine in San Francisco.

Qigong devotees report better sleep, less anxiety and increased energy. But the proof has lagged behind.

The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, part of the National Institutes of Health, is financing more studies on medical qigong, which involves therapists working individually with clients to correct energy imbalances that have led to pain or disease. But it's harder to get funding for studies about self-practice, said Kevin Chen, an associate professor at the Center for Integrative Medicine at the University of Maryland School of Medicine. "There are not many qigong masters who can produce measurable results repeatedly," Dr. Chen explained.

The database of the Qigong Institute, an online clearinghouse for information on medical qigong in Menlo Park, Calif. (qigonginstitute.org), includes more than 3,500 studies, reporting qigong's positive effects on hypertension, arthritis and longevity. But rather than randomized controlled studies, the gold standard for Western medicine, many studies are anecdotal or have small sample sizes.

Scientific evidence or not, plenty of Americans find mind-body exercise a waste of time. To give gymgoers a taste of qigong without scaring them away, health clubs have introduced hybrids like Kung Yo, at the Sports Club/LA, and Qigong Yoga, at Equinox.

“If they were to go take a regular qigong class, most people would be bored,” said Steven Leigh, who teaches Kung Yo, a blend of yoga, kung fu and qigong. “I sneak it in at the beginning.”

Qigong practitioners predict the easy-to-teach practice will one day rival yoga stateside. Does that mean a future of designer qigong clothes and S.U.V. ads? Not necessarily.

“Qigong probably won’t be as popular as yoga because you can’t really get a beautiful body — it’s such an internal practice,” said Kimberly Ivy, founder of Embrace the Moon School for Taijiquan and Qigong in Seattle. “And qigong does not have the same cult of personality as yoga. How do you get celebrity status when you are standing still, breathing?”

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