

CHI GONG HO (June 94)

New enthusiasm for an ancient healing/exercise discipline is filling fitness classes and piquing the interest of scientists as well

BY FRANNY HELLER ZORN

It was a long shot. For 14 years, Wen-hsien Wu, M.D., director of the Pain Management Center of the University of Medicine and Dentistry in Newark, New Jersey, had tried everything on his "most desperate" pain patients--invalids languishing as a result of a little-understood neural disorder called reflex sympathetic dystrophy. So excruciating is their pain that even bearing their own weight in a standing position is intolerable, and putting on a pair of socks feels like a razor lacerating the skin. Out of options and completely frustrated, Wu turned to chi gong, the ancient Chinese art of self-healing. He found that after just six chi gong sessions over a period of six weeks his patients' pain was significantly reduced. After years of immobility they were ready for rehabilitation therapy so they could get on with their lives. "I don't know how or why," says a baffled Wu, "but there has to be something there."

That something was news last year to those of us who first heard about chi gong on the Bill Moyers public television special *Healing and the Mind*. But for many millions of Chinese, chi (meaning "energy") gong (meaning "cultivation") has been for the past 5,000 years the best and only route to a long, healthy life. Though mainstream Western scientists are not convinced that the practice does anything more than trigger what Harvard's Herbert Benson, M.D., identified and coined "the relaxation response," even those researchers agree that, for whatever reason, chi gong works--though few believe that it has the far-reaching benefits chi gong practitioners claim.

Healing chi gong (that's the phonetic spelling; it is also written as "qi gong" or "chi kung") is based on the belief that a powerful energy system, or vital life force, called chi circulates and regulates the body's organic functions, oxygenating the blood and nourishing the organs as well as the lymph, nervous and other systems. According to the theory, we are all born with a certain amount of this energy, which diminishes as we age until it is used up and we die. A weakened or blocked chi flow is the source of disease and stress, and can shorten our life span. Conversely, a blueprint for good health and longevity is to have balanced chi at all times. This can be achieved by practicing the chi gong moving and breathing exercises

called internal chi gong (see the box on page 48). Or it can be gotten from a chi gong healer by means of external chi gong--the emission of chi from the healer's hands into the body of an ailing person.

According to one chi gong master, Ching Tse Lee, Ph.D., the Taiwan-born chairman of the psychology department at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, "I can sense chi around the body as an aura. A healthy person has a white or beige aura of about a half inch or an inch around them. A gray aura surrounds an unhealthy person. No aura means it's really bad."

Lee, like a number of Western-trained Chinese, sought traditional medicine when he realized that Western science, for all its brilliance, did not have all the answers to getting and staying well. Lee, who took a sabbatical in Taiwan to learn chi gong, says that besides being able to "tune in" to another person's chi, "I can also feel it using my open palm to scan a person's body. If there is sickness, I will feel a bit of pain at the site. I also feel a tingling, heat, a dryness or wetness that gives me information about someone's system. And I can feel if the energy is low or isn't there at all." Another healer, Effie Chow, R.N., Ph.D., president of the East West Academy of Healing Arts in San Francisco, adds that she can alleviate many conditions, including cerebral palsy, Parkinson's disease, post-stroke paralysis, high blood pressure, arthritis, Alzheimer's and AIDS. "I boost my clients' immune systems by just being in the room with them. That is the power of the chi gong master."

That, of course, sounds like nonsense to most Western scientists, who doubt the existence of any phenomenon that can't be seen, touched or measured. As for chi gong "cures," Benson, who is a professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School, speaks for establishment science when he says, "Is chi gong unique? Absolutely not." Chi gong, he says, "causes physiological changes such as lowering metabolic and breathing rates that have been elevated by stress. There are scores of other techniques that elicit the same responses. Is chi gong special? No. But if you believe in it, then you get the added component of the placebo effect. Choose any method that works--prayer, yoga, meditation or chi gong. They all work equally well if you believe they do."

But there is a small, clubby network of doctors and scientists at such prestigious institutions as Stanford, the Menninger Clinic and New York City's Mount Sinai Hospital who don't share their mainstream colleagues' skepticism about the existence of chi. They are quietly studying the phenomenon. Indeed, they follow each other's research avidly, and claim that what they are learning will be responsible for medicine's next great leap forward. These researchers, most of whom practice chi gong

themselves, speak of "subtle energies," "anomalies" and "energy medicine." Of course, that's Westernese for chi, and translated it means a human bioelectrical energy field.

"Any therapy that utilizes a type of energy field--electric, magnetic, sonic, etcetera--rather than a chemical as its treatment modality is classified as energy medicine," explains one of these researchers, William Tiller, Ph.D., professor emeritus of engineering at Stanford's department of materials science and engineering. "Humans are potential sources and may be conscious detectors of subtle energies." Tiller believes that subtle energies are present throughout the universe even though we can't yet detect them. He also believes that they play a major role in our health.

The idea of measuring something like chi that can't be seen or touched was unthinkable ten years ago. "But," says David Muehsam, a 30-year-old researcher in bioelectric magnetism who works in the Bioelectro Chemistry Laboratory at New York City's Mount Sinai School of Medicine, "recent technological advances now allow researchers to use very sensitive measuring devices to detect a weak, low-level electromagnetic field and to measure the effects of this phenomenon."

That's just what Tiller and his colleagues are doing. In a 1991 paper published in the *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, Tiller wrote up an experiment that, he says, "provides evidence that energy is emitted from the human body or mind." He asked his subjects to emit energy, without physical contact, into a device containing a mixture of gases. Tiller reported that the gases were activated and deactivated at will--evidence, he says, of the existence of a human bioelectrical energy field. "This isn't airy, fairy stuff," he maintains. "Conventional scientists want to sweep this under the rug, but I won't let them. I want to build a scientific bridge strong enough for them to walk from the domain of conventional physics to the domain of subtle-energy physics and its role in both science and humanity."

Another researcher who believes in chi energy is Elmer Green, Ph.D., known in the scientific community as "the father of biofeedback." A biopsychologist with a background in physics, Green, who is the retired director of the Center for Applied Psychophysiology at the Menninger Clinic, conducted experiments measuring and comparing the electrical charges coming from the bodies of meditators and healers, including master chi gong healer Ching Lee, and from nonhealers. Green says, "We got 200 volts out of some of the healers." He adds, "Everything is energy." Kenneth Sancier, Ph.D., a chemist who is a senior scientist at the Stanford Research Institute, translates: "There are physiological and clinical changes that occur in the body with the practice of chi gong. These are changes

in brain waves, blood circulation, blood pressure, heartbeat and respiration that alleviate the symptoms of hypertension, cardiovascular problems, kidney disease, asthma and cancer."

According to Green, chi's implications for our health are beyond medicine's wildest dreams. Using it, he says, "you can take charge of 80 to 90 percent of your physiological problems and handle them yourself. Physiology is plastic; it can be manipulated to do things people didn't think it could do, like controlling genetically caused health conditions. Chi is the interface between your mind and your neurological structure. Using it, you can learn to release endorphins to a specific area needed for pain control."

A remarkable and documented instance that supports such claims is the case of Craig Reid, Ph.D. Reid, an entomologist in New Haven, Connecticut, suffers from the most severe form of cystic fibrosis, a genetically caused fatal illness that destroys the lungs and interferes with the assimilation of food. Few victims survive past their twenties, and at age 16 Reid was told he'd be dead in five years. But in 1979, after graduating from Cornell, Reid went to Taiwan and studied chi gong for four months. Four months after that, his symptoms were gone and he quit the 30 pills a day he had taken most of his life. In 1986, to publicize chi gong as a therapy for cystic fibrosis, Reid did a speed walk across America--a virtually impossible feat, say physicians, for someone with Reid's kind of CF. Though widely reported in the press, the walk's message was essentially ignored by the medical and scientific community. Today, at the age of 38 Reid remains active and well and, with his China-born wife, Silvia Nien Mei Reid, Ph.D., a neuroscientist at Yale, has developed a reputation among injured athletes as a chi gong healer. Among the "several hundred" sports people the couple say they have worked with are the Soviet pole-vaulting team; Kendall Gill of the Seattle SuperSonics; and Marita Payne, Canada's two-time Olympic silver medalist in track.

Tiller likens the struggle of his small group to science's most famous case of establishment intractability. "Just like in Galileo's time, scientists today won't look into the telescope, so to speak," and "experience chi for themselves." But, predicts Tiller, the "power structure" will be forced to change in "three to five years because there is so much data coming out of these experiments that the public will insist that conventional medicine investigate it."

Indeed, the groundswell seems to have begun. The National Institutes of Health's Office of Alternative Medicine this year gave a grant to Wu at the University of Medicine and Dentistry to further study his pain patients.

And conservative Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York City recently started a chi gong elective for stressed-out medical students. In the meantime, says Ching Lee, while scientists argue, you can get a long-life jump on the whole lot of them. Learn chi gong, he says, and then "practice, practice, practice."

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THREE MOVES TO JUMP-START YOUR CHI

CHI GONG is low maintenance and easy to learn. Though at least 30 minutes daily is recommended (try 15 to 20 minutes in the morning, and the rest in three to five mini-sessions), chi gong can take as little time as you want it to and still be beneficial. And it goes where you go.

This three-part chi gong sequence, designed by master teacher Ching Tse Lee, Ph.D., is aimed at cultivating chi in three important ways. The first exercise generates chi, the second balances it and the third facilitates its flow. "Chi gong does not require a great deal of time," says Lee, "but it does demand total devotion of your mind, body and spirit."

1. THE REJUVENATOR: GRAND ULTIMATE CHI GONG

Adopt standing posture (A): Keep feet shoulder-width apart and parallel. Bend knees to a "quarter squat" position--about 45 degrees. Keep upper body straight and relaxed and let your hands rest along the sides of your body. (B): Bring arms out in front of you (about 35 degrees) with elbows slightly bent, hands relaxed and palms facing each other. Relax body and mind. Bring your palms closer to each other until you feel chi in your palms--you may feel tingling, throbbing, trembling, cold, heat or electric sensations. Once you feel chi, simply stay with it and notice what happens; the subtlety and intensity may change and the sensations may come and go. The point is to become familiar with the feeling. Practice for three to five minutes. The exercise will leave you refreshed and rejuvenated.

To expand chi: As you become aware of the chi, you will notice that you "merge" with it and it grows--whatever you are "holding" in your palms will get bigger and bigger and your fingers and hands may seem to grow in size. Again, just stay with these changes for as long as you can without too much strain on your knees. Anywhere from two to ten minutes is fine. What's most important is being one with your chi.

2. THE CALMER: HARMONIZATION CHI GONG

This exercise balances yin and yang chi and promotes serenity. Maintain the standing posture (B) as before. Enjoy the feeling of chi for five to ten minutes. Then observe your breathing: the natural expansion of your body on the inhale, the contraction on the exhale. Be one with this movement. Next, observe how your palms come closer to each other as you contract and move away from each other as you expand. Once you've noticed your breathing and body expansion/contraction, feel the energy around your body. Does one part of your body feel lighter or heavier? Warmer or colder? If you practice every day, eventually you will feel the energy around you as even and balanced.

3. THE ENERGIZER: BREATHING CHI GONG

This exercise enhances the circulation of your chi. Start again in the standing posture (B). Relax your body and observe your breathing as in the previous exercise for a few minutes. Then (C) inhaling, let your arms float up to shoulder height with the elbows slightly bent. (D) Exhaling, let arms stretch out effortlessly. (E) Inhaling, let your arms bend again and drop down slowly until your thumbs touch the sides of your legs; then exhale and let your arms straighten along your sides. Repeat this exercise for three to five minutes, or longer. As you do, observe the chi flow around you. You may feel chi circulation from your back to your hands as you complete each cycle. Empty your mind, be one with the exercise; you will eventually notice the chi movement--sometimes when you least expect it.

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