

# INTRODUCTION

On a cold, windy December day in 1995, I sat in a Thai restaurant in St. Paul, Minnesota with my friend Jim, an African American man with whom I shared a passion for the spiritual path. Once a year or so, we met to catch up and compare notes about our inner journeys. At the time, I didn't have much of one. I was one tired and stressed-out guy. I had a fulltime psychotherapy practice, a busy teaching schedule, an old home in perpetual need of repair, two active school-aged children, and a marriage. Like almost everyone I knew, I was doing too much with too little.

As Jim and I sat across from each other, enjoying our spicy food on that freezing day, I asked him if he'd ever heard of a mind/body practice called qigong (pronounced "chee gong"). All I knew was that it was an ancient Chinese system of movement, breathing and visualization that supposedly was a powerful stress-buster. I'd heard that if you practiced qigong regularly, you were rewarded with renewed energy and a more peaceful disposition. Smiling his wry smile, Jim replied that if I

was really interested in qigong, I should learn it from the source—a Chinese qigong master.

Returning my friend's wry smile, I asked: "Any chance you know where I might find one?" He said he sure did—in Coon Rapids, just 10 miles north of where we were sitting. There, he said, a Chinese man was teaching qigong classes at a community college.

I looked out the window at the snow, whipped into a white fury by the howling wind, and tried to take in the moment. Here I was on a cold day in Minnesota, eating a Thai lunch with my African-American friend, learning about a Chinese qigong master who was teaching just a short drive away. I didn't entirely understand why, but somehow the moment seemed propitious. "Give me the phone number," I said.

Four weeks later, I met Master Chunyi Lin and embarked on a journey that would profoundly change me, both personally and in the way I practice psychotherapy. In the pages that follow, I would like to share some of that journey with you. More importantly, I will offer you a path for enhancing your own vitality, emotional health, and capacity for joy via the simple practice of qigong. You don't need to become a Taoist or Buddhist; you don't need to study the breathing techniques of the yogis. You need only learn a set of simple tools for healing that will be available to you anytime, anywhere.

## **The Qigong-Psychotherapy Connection**

There are plenty of books out there about Eastern mind-body practices, and some that focus specifically on qigong. And of course, there are numerous books about psychotherapy. My

focus is integrative: this book offers a simple, powerful way to introduce qigong into Western psychotherapy and thereby maximize mind-body healing. Through 10 years of qigong practice, I have found that combining qigong tools with Western healing principles not only expedites the psychotherapeutic process but can also alter the outcome of therapy. Both in and out of therapy, the mingling of qigong practices with Western mental health practices can help you to enhance your energy, better meet life's daily challenges, and deepen your connections to the world around you.

Why isn't psychotherapy enough, all by itself? Let me say first that good therapy can be a potent tool to help people confront difficult, often lifelong struggles and guide them toward resolution. As a working psychologist for 30 years, I have the utmost respect for the power of the therapeutic process. But I often feel frustrated in not being able to help my clients translate the shifts they've made in therapy into more significant changes in their lives outside of my office. I am not alone in this regard; many therapists I have talked with share this frustration.

Too often, people get some therapeutic help—and in this age of managed care, maybe just barely enough help, and head right back into the world slightly better equipped to withstand life's stresses. Therapy often operates as a kind of psychological MASH unit, wherein we patch up people as best we can and then send them back into the chaos, hoping they will fare better. Integrating qigong into therapy offers immediate, effective tools to not only help people mitigate the effects of their stress-filled world, but to help them *maintain the changes* they have made in therapy.

I have also observed that psychotherapy can leave clients so self-aware that they consequently become unduly self-focused. This isn't a critique of certain schools of therapy, but rather of therapy in general—the kind I do included. This certainly isn't our intent as therapists, in fact, quite the contrary. But while our theories and tools teach us how to help our clients develop the *capacity* to be more meaningfully connected to the larger world, we frequently lack the tools and time to help our clients integrate this increased capacity for connection into reality. Too often, clients come away with more clarity about themselves, better communication skills and other relational strategies, but without actually deepening their connection to the world around them.

What I find most exciting about the integration of qigong into psychotherapy is its ability to help people open their “heart energy,” thereby helping them to turn outward and deepen their relationships with others and the world around them. My experience as a psychologist—and as a human being—has shown me the happiest people are those who feel both cared about *and* care about others. This is the deepest potential of qigong—its capacity to help us to open our hearts, become more actively engaged with the world, and experience a sustaining sense of connection.

## **Who Can Benefit from This Book**

The book addresses three audiences—psychotherapists, individuals who are in therapy, and all others who are committed to enhancing their emotional health and self-understanding and connection to the world around them. If you are a psychotherapist, you will learn a set of powerful, concrete tools to seamlessly integrate into your therapy practice. I highly

recommend that you also practice these techniques yourself, both to enhance your own health and to deepen your therapeutic effectiveness. Regular practice will help you to be more calm, centered and open-hearted as you sit with your clients. Ram Dass once said, “You can only get as high as your therapist.” I would amend that to, “You can only breathe as deeply as your therapist.”

If you are currently in therapy, I invite you to use this book as a resource as you move through the healing process. You’ll learn some simple techniques for changing negative thinking patterns, as well as ways to quickly calm yourself during challenging moments. The perspectives in this book may also help you clarify what you want to accomplish in your healing and growth process. Practicing qigong in tandem with your therapy work can not only help you resolve conflicts and enjoy life more, but also deepen your sense of belonging in the world.

For those of you who are not in therapy, this book will offer some simple ways to enrich your emotional life. You’ll learn how the practice of qigong, in combination with key principles of Western mental health, can transform both your experience of yourself and your relationships with others. You’ll learn how to use your breath and thoughts to increase your energy; how to use a couple of simple qigong movements to bring more calm into your life; and how to live with a more open heart.

Throughout this book, I will speak directly to the reader in plain, conversational language. I will avoid all psychological jargon (to the best of my ability). Where appropriate, I will share my own experiences with life challenges, my own therapy work, and my experience with qigong. While I am a therapist and a teacher of both therapy and qigong, I view myself first

and foremost as a fellow seeker along the road of self-understanding. I invite you to join me on this road.

## What is Qigong?

Qigong is a branch of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), coming out of the Taoist tradition. The word “qigong” roughly translates as the practice of energy. The philosophy underlying this practice is that free-flowing energy throughout the body is vital to good physical and mental health. Many factors can block that energy flow, including stress, illness, and emotional conflicts. (TCM believes that unbalanced emotions are the *number one* cause of energy blocks, and then of the consequent physical and mental health problems.)<sup>1 2</sup> Qigong, sometimes called “acupuncture without needles,” is a simple method of movement, breathing, visualization and and sometimes sounds that can open up those blocks and restore you to your natural state of physical and emotional vitality.

Qigong was developed in China more than 5,000 years ago, as early Taoists searched for ways to live longer and healthier lives. They learned by studying what was in front of them—the natural world. They watched the turning of the seasons, the changes in weather, and how plants and animals responded to these shifts. As they studied nature, the Taoists noticed in particular the rhythms of the animal world. They saw that animals followed their instinctual natures, with no consciousness to distract them from their focus on staying alive and healthy. The Taoists watched and wondered: How was it that the heron could stand on one leg, poised to strike at a minnow, and calmly hold that position indefinitely? How could a mountain lion lie totally relaxed for an extended period, and then spring upon its prey in a lightning-quick, highly-focused

explosion of energy? These animals, along with the rabbit, the monkey, the tiger, and others, taught the Taoists much about health, especially the natural and efficient use of energy.

The cultivation, harnessing, and optimal use of energy became a particular focus of the Taoists. They realized that human beings, too, could harness their energy and use it more wisely and efficiently. They identified rivers of energy running through our bodies, called meridians, which deeply influence our health and well-being. They witnessed how stress, unproductive emotions, poor health habits, and other factors could cause these meridians to flow sluggishly, or even become blocked. If one didn't readily address the blockage, physical and/or mental health problems often resulted, including headaches, back pain, stomach problems, depression, anxiety, and a general state of exhaustion.

But the Taoists didn't stop with diagnosis. They further discovered that if we listened to our body's elemental energies—rather than to our brains or emotions—we would find out how to restore our health and well-being. By tuning into the body's subtle rhythms, we would learn what to eat for maximal health, how to best adapt to the changing seasons, how to live healthfully in our particular environments, and how to heal ourselves when we were sick. The Taoists also developed many practices to help rebalance and restore the body's natural energy flow. These simple practices—repeated, refined, and taught over thousands of years—are at the heart of qigong.

Qigong is one of three components of Traditional Chinese Medicine, along with acupuncture and herbs. Qigong is sometimes used in conjunction with other TCM elements and at other times independently. Traditional Chinese Medicine

views medicine and health very differently than we do in the West. When we think about using medicine, it's usually because we already have something wrong with us. We're feeling sick or in pain, and we hope that a pill or potion will make us feel better.

By contrast, TCM practices aspire to much more than “fixing” a medical symptom. Ken Cohen, perhaps the foremost Western scholar of Taoism and qigong, tells us that “...qigong differs from modern medicine in that it strengthens bodily resistance to disease, enhancing the function of the immune system, promoting intelligence, and prolonging life.”<sup>2</sup> Cohen has further found that qigong can lower the body's stress response, alter entrenched traits such as Type A personality, and deepen what he calls “interpersonal sensitivity,” the ability to be attuned and responsive to others' emotions.<sup>3</sup> In short, qigong is both preventative and deeply healing. It is medicine for the mind, body and soul.

## **Waking Up**

When I started my own practice of qigong, I was an anxious, frazzled guy who drank too much coffee, ate too many sweets, and watched too much TV, all of which I thought I deserved as compensations for my daily stresses. I assumed that living under stress was a given—after all, most of my friends felt as harassed and hassled as I did. In other words, I felt like I was living a pretty normal existence. However, I hated feeling so chronically depleted of energy, and so powerless over my life.

I was also living on an emotional roller coaster. Having been in therapy a number of times, I believed that being “in touch with my feelings” at all times would help me to better understand

myself. The idea was that close attention to my feelings would show me whether I was getting my needs met, and what I needed to do to feel better. Being Irish, of course, left me with a lot of feelings to keep track of and process. My therapists never warned me about the energetic impact of this self-absorbed state. Sometimes I felt calm and centered, but many other times I felt tuned up too high—like a screeching violin—or nearly reeling with exhaustion. I spent a lot of time trying to analyze these ups and downs as I hung onto the roller coaster by my fingernails. Something was seriously off kilter.

It wasn't that therapy didn't help me. It absolutely did. Working with skilled and compassionate therapists, I was able to break out of some very destructive patterns and to accept myself more fully. But therapy had also left me turned too far inward when I deeply needed to turn outward, toward other people and to the world at large. The happiness I sought remained elusive. My energy level continued to spiral up and down. I needed something more.

When I entered the classroom of our local community college for my first qigong class, I wasn't aware of what was missing from my life, or what I truly needed. I came to class to reduce my stress level, period. Looking toward the front of the room, I saw a slender, 30-something Chinese man sitting quietly. A few moments later, he stood and moved to the center of the room. "Hello, everyone, I am qigong master from China, Master Chunyi Lin," he began. "I know Americans feel funny about calling someone Master, so you can call me Chunyi, or Lin." Looking out at the class, he said, as his eyes crinkled at the corners, "Or, 'hey, Chinese guy.'"

And so began my first qigong class. Master Lin, founder of a school called Spring Forest Qigong, taught us seven simple body movements to help us focus our minds and balance our energy. He showed us breathing exercises and visualization practices. It was all surprisingly basic and user-friendly; even I got the hang of it pretty quickly. I liked Master Lin, whom I found to be humorous, down-to-earth, encouraging and admirably peaceful. Slowly, I began to feel pulled toward the practice of qigong.

At our teacher's suggestion, I committed to practicing qigong one half hour a day. At first, nothing seemed to change. But within a month, I began to notice that my sleep was better, and I was a bit less moody. After two months of daily practice, I was eating less junk food and drinking less coffee. I still watched too much TV, but I began to notice that it was depleting my energy rather than restoring it. I began to watch less. I got outdoors more, and slowly, very slowly, I began to feel an emerging sense of balance in my life.

Over the next several years, I continued to practice qigong. The benefits deepened. I found myself feeling more connected to others, less self absorbed. And yes, happier. Nonetheless, it took me a long time to begin to bring this simple practice into my work with therapy clients. As a clinician who did mostly long-term, psychodynamic and psychoanalytic-informed therapy, I was entrenched in these approaches and could see no opening for qigong as part of the healing process. Until I worked with Ron.

## **Breathing Lessons**

Ron was a bright, articulate Protestant minister and a very motivated therapy client. But he was prone to intellectualizing

his issues rather than experiencing them. Whenever he approached any emotionally-laden material, he would become physically agitated, but would quickly turn to analyzing his experience—the whys, the wherefores, the possible solutions. It was a learned response: Growing up, he and his older brother argued moral philosophy and religious theology with their college professor father, who admired intellectual prowess and disdained any show of emotion.

For awhile, I tried to “meet my client where he was” and reason with Ron, using my knowledge of psychological theory. But I was not his match in the debating department, and it really wasn’t the issue. What was causing this man unhappiness and turmoil was being out of touch with his human experience.

One afternoon, I sat with Ron in my office as he got close to some emotional material and began to enact his usual routine of “stuckness”: talking fast, with his voice a little higher-pitched than usual, and tilting forward in his chair, his body rigid with tension. I was doing what I usually did when I worked with Ron, groping around in my tool bag of therapeutic techniques and hoping for a way to help him move forward. I felt incompetent and frustrated—both with my client and with myself. Out of exasperation and an attempt to give myself some quiet time to ponder what to do next, I asked Ron to sit back in his chair and try some focused breathing—the kind of quiet, relaxed breathing I had learned in qigong.

We sat there for maybe three or four minutes, Ron breathing with his eyes closed while I hoped and prayed for some clarity to come to me about how to help him. Then, unexpectedly, he began to speak. “You know, I think I’m more lonely than I really ever knew. And I’m not really sure why.”

But it wasn't his words, which coming from him was quite significant, as much as his body that I remember. As Ron spoke, his voice was noticeably lower and slower than before. His shoulders were no longer stiff and hunched, but relaxed and natural. Once or twice, I heard his voice thicken with emotion.

When I pointed out these changes a little later in the session, he nodded in agreement. "I can feel the difference, too," he said. "Somehow, I feel more *in* myself." This little shift opened the way for us to repeat this process every time he got stuck, often, though not always, with a similar outcome. The turning point—pausing to breathe—wasn't a particularly dramatic moment in itself. It was a small, quiet experience. But it was profound in the sense that it gave Ron a direct experience of connecting to himself, in a way that was both safe and liberating. That simple intervention became a cornerstone of my work with most clients, and I use it to this day. Particularly when I sense that clients need some kind of release, I ask them to simply pause and breathe.

After my experience with Ron, I began to integrate other tools from my qigong practice into my work with clients. I taught them a couple of basic movements, imagery techniques, and qigong concepts that helped them to ground themselves in their bodies and in the present moment. Because these practices are highly portable, I encouraged my clients to use them at home as well as during sessions. As I introduced qigong tools to clients, I continued to utilize traditional psychotherapeutic approaches. The results of this integration were surprising and heartening. For many clients, the pace of therapy accelerated. Others reported not only resolving long-standing problems, but also sensing a difference in how they greeted the world. They

reported feeling more open, more connected. As one client put it, “I feel more heart-centered.”

## **Building Bridges**

Psychotherapists, therapy clients, and others interested in personal growth have long been frustrated by difficulty of sustaining emotional growth. How is it that we can bravely and persistently address our issues—dysfunctional marriages, neglectful parents, abuse, self-esteem problems, whatever else haunts us—yet so readily return to our old ways and outdated notions of ourselves? I have seen this backtracking happen thousands of times in my 30 years of practice. I have experienced it countless times in my own efforts to change and grow.

The good news is that many Western psychotherapists and physicians have begun to get seriously interested in the broader questions about how people heal. Why isn't the impact of psychotherapy more enduring? How does stress affect our psychological difficulties: is it a cause, an exacerbating factor, an impediment to healing, or all of the above? Is there a connection between our culture's epidemic of chronic illness and our emotional lives? Western scientists are now undertaking rigorous research on what Eastern healers have understood for centuries—the vital and complex connections between our emotions, our brains, and our bodily responses. Among other things, we're learning more about the powerful impact of stress on mental and physical health. We're becoming more open to mind/body approaches to healing—approaches that reap lasting benefits. My hope is that this book will contribute to this emerging healing paradigm.

## A Brief Tour of the Book

The book is divided into three sections, each different not only in content, but also in length and style. The first section introduces the fundamentals of qigong—the basic concepts and techniques. The second section brings those specifics into therapy and daily life. The last section shows what can happen when we bring qigong and psychotherapy together in the big picture of life—how it can transform not only the process of therapy but also the ways in which people orient themselves in the world. Between the chapters, you will also find four exercises to help you begin to integrate the learning as you read.

**Part One: Self-Cultivation.** Self-cultivation is the process of understanding oneself, both mind and body, and learning how to live more consciously. The Taoists believe that it is necessary for individuals to cultivate themselves in order to authentically engage with others and with the larger world. This philosophy is consistent with what I believe good psychotherapy should have to offer, that working on oneself in therapy makes it possible to better engage with the world.

Chapter One presents the first task of self-cultivation—learning conscious breathing. I will show how focused breathing can help you achieve emotional balance and maintain a strong, enduring sense of well-being. Chapter Two highlights the impact of stress on our minds and bodies, and how simple it is to use qigong to intervene in our stress response. Chapter Three addresses the underutilized power of the mind. You will learn how to employ visualization and other kinds of imagery to deepen awareness and wisdom and improve your health and well-being.

Chapter Four focuses on energy. You will discover that everything—absolutely everything—is energy. Once you understand the nature of energy, you'll be able to make more informed decisions about every aspect of your life, from the work you do, to the music you play, to the friends you choose. The final chapter of Part One presents some foundational concepts of Taoist philosophy that offer a framework for the healing process. Throughout this section, I will show how these concepts and tools can be easily integrated with the best of Western psychotherapy.

**Part Two: Healing the Self.** People turn to therapy and other healing approaches because they are suffering. The hope is that seeking help from another will not only reduce your current suffering but also help you live a more happier life from this point forward. Integrating qigong into therapy can help this healing become more likely. Chapter Six is about bringing self-cultivation techniques into the therapeutic process. Through case examples, I will show how these simple concepts and techniques can impact the therapy process as well as be easily incorporated into daily life. Chapters Seven and Eight focus on the power of qigong practices to affect two common and challenging therapeutic issues, resistance to change and trauma, respectively.

**Part Three: Beyond the Self.** This section, just one chapter long, discusses the rewards of melding the therapeutic process with self-cultivation practice. These rewards include healing old wounds, helping you to better identify and meet your needs, improving your ability to communicate with others, raising your self-esteem and freeing up your flow of energy. But the deepest change—and the one that qigong most powerfully facilitates—

is the shifting of your consciousness to become more heart-centered.

This final chapter shows that when your heart energy opens, an incredible transformation takes place. You can no longer stay focused only on yourself. Instead, you find yourself drawn toward the goodness in others. You want not only to be loved, but also to love. You want not only to be known, but also to know others. You become aware of not only what you long for, but also the longings of others. The Taoist philosophy and the practice of qigong can show us the way to this place of deep and abiding connection.

I hope you enjoy the book and that it will help you to walk on this earth with more peace and joy in your heart.

Patrick Dougherty

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