Yinyang in qigong 1: Nourishing and moving

“Moving, be like water, still, be like a mirror”.

Zhuangzi, 3rd century BCE

Nourishing – yin

The very act of living gradually consumes our essential energies (*jing-essence*) until they eventually run out and we decline and die. However, with the right lifestyle we can delay this process. This is why traditional Chinese nourishment of life (*yangsheng*) teachings first of all emphasise the basics of good dietary habits, ample rest and sleep, and nourishing ourselves through intimacy with fellow humans and animals as well as contact with nature, art and music. At a deeper level, practices such as holding a stable and aligned posture and releasing tension through the body, breathing deeply and slowly into the *dantian*, and stilling the mind can build and restore our *jing* – the strength of which ultimately determines how well we age and how long we live.

Nourishing methods are inherent in all qigong and are especially important if we are exhausted, ill, convalescing or suffering from problems like anxiety, insomnia, worry etc. For extreme fatigue (for example post-viral syndrome, ME, fibromyalgia, long Covid, cancer etc.) we may need to avoid moving practices altogether and start to add them only gradually and patiently to avoid exhaustion.

Healthy or sick, we can get profound enrichment on every level of our being from nourishing practice. However, we should also be aware of some possible pitfalls. Chinese dietary theory offers one good example of why. Rich and nourishing (*wei*) foods are an essential part of the diet. They include oil and fat, dairy, fish, meat, nuts, strong flavours and so on. If we do not eat enough of them we can suffer from malnourishment. However, if we consume too much (as in most modern Western diets) and especially if we lead a sedentary life, they can cause stagnation and give rise to all manner of diseases.

In the same way too much still, yin practice risks causing weakness of the body, excessive inward focus and internal stagnation. This is especially the case if we suffer from depression – usually characterised in Chinese medicine as due to stagnation of qi and blood, in which case we should do more moving and outward-going practices, rather than still internal ones.

Young people also often find that yin practices such as qigong standing, meditation and slow mindful-movement are difficult to tolerate as their yang energy is strong, and they usually need to do more vigorous, external, moving exercise such as sports and martial arts.

And it’s not just young people who may find this work challenging. For those unused to stillness, even a few minutes of qigong standing can give rise to feelings of frustration, anger or resentment as well as physical discomfort and pain, and there may be an uncontrollable desire to move. This reveals layers of body/mind stagnation that underlie our normal state and which we are accustomed to ignore. Sometimes other powerful feelings can bubble up and

give rise to weeping, laughter, or the unexpected upsurge of memories. While we should never force ourselves to endure any of these challenges to the point of putting us off practice altogether, it is good to persist – observing, not getting caught up in them and always aiming to soften and release.

Moving – yang

One of the simplest definitions of health in Chinese medicine is 'free flow'. This describes the uninterrupted movement of qi, blood and body fluids through the body (as well as a free and easy state of mind). Remember that there are 100,000 miles of major, minor and minute blood vessels in the body, and the blood needs to flow to the most distant capillaries in order that every single cell can be nourished.

Drawing from the traditional Chinese internal martial arts, qigong takes the body through a wide range of natural movement – lengthening, releasing, opening, closing, spiralling and twisting – mobilising all the body tissues while always maintaining release and softness. This will help develop broad physical skills and keep qi and blood flowing so that all bodily processes can perform to their optimum.

Nowadays we all know how important regular movement is for mental and physical health and wellbeing, right through into old age, and in normal times gyms are packed with people running on treadmills and pumping weights, while streets and parks are full of joggers. Aerobic exercise is especially popular. It promotes flow of qi and blood by increasing the pumping action of the heart, does so more rapidly than any other method, and can be achieved with minimal skill or practice. However, as with yin stillness practices, there are potential pitfalls to be aware of with unskilled or excessive movement.

The most obvious is the risk of injury found with many sports, especially if movement is uncoordinated and misaligned.

Over-training can also weaken the immune system and impair the body's self-repair mechanisms. This happens when it is too exhausting or too forceful – tipping the autonomic nervous system into a chronic yang, fight-or-flight, sympathetic-dominant state. This gives rise to cell inflammation and failure of the normal cell repair that comes from a return to a yin parasympathetic-dominance. Hyper sympathetic stimulation can also affect us emotionally and lead to greater hostility, fear and lack of trust and emotional connection.

Vigorous exercise (whether strength-training or aerobics), while a valuable form of self-medication for many kinds of emotional stress, can also obscure the need to address the root of the problem. In Chinese medicine, stagnation lies at the root of much depression, frustration, resentment etc. and working out in the gym or going for long runs can rapidly move and break through this stagnation, leaving us feeling more at ease. But since it treats the symptom, not the cause, the dose may have to be repeated – more often or more intense – to get the same effect, leading to exercise addiction. In this case, the right amount of internal practice, emphasising mindfulness, relaxed movement and mental stillness can help dispel the stagnation at a deeper level, although it may be a lengthy and demanding process.

Finally, modern exercise science is increasingly coming round to echoing the words of the great 7th century doctor Sun Simiao, *"The way of nurturing life is to constantly strive for minor exertion but never become greatly fatigued and force what you cannot endure,"* and, *"The way of nurturing life consists of … never sitting nor lying for a long time … extended lying down damages the qi … extended sitting damages the flesh* [muscles]."

Over the past century or so we have abandoned nearly all the natural evolutionary movements that helped shape our human bodies – walking, squatting, chopping wood, hunting, digging, carrying, dancing, running etc. We have farmed most of these out to machines and have created deliberate exercise routines to replace them. Yet it is becoming clear that even the most vigorous daily workout cannot substitute for the qi and blood moving benefits of constant minor movement and a relaxed body/mind.

The optimum amount of exercise is invigorating and makes us want to move more throughout the whole day, and the evidence is clear that those who do moderate exercise achieve more overall daily movement than those who go for the burn. It is also clear that the health benefits of moderate exercise combined with steady movement through the day (i.e. less sitting) are greater than a single concentrated hard workout.

Yang within yin and yin within yang

So both yin stillness and yang movement are essential parts of qigong self-cultivation. How much we emphasise one or the other will depend on many factors – our age, health, mental state, our needs on a particular day and so on. Yet yinyang theory teaches us that there is always yin within yang and yang within yin, hence the saying, *"In all stillness there must be movement and in all movement there must be stillness".*

This means that during quiet standing qigong we open the body vertically and horizontally while releasing the soft tissue. When there is minimal holding or tightness (physical, mental or emotional), then qi can follow its nature and flow through the body without obstruction, carrying blood and body fluids with it. This is movement within stillness. And by contrast, even in the most vigorous qigong forms we try to hold a quiet mind and remain as soft and released as possible, maintaining stillness within the heart of movement (and in the internal martial arts within the heat of battle).

Yinyang in qigong 2: internal and external

Chinese martial arts are commonly differentiated into two styles: external-yang (*waijia*) and internal-yin (*neijia*). Of course this distinction is a simplification and not rigid, since like all yinyang differentiation, each contains elements of the other. However it can be a useful shorthand.

Waijia – external – yang

Mention Chinese martial arts to most people and they likely think of people flying through the air, yelling and delivering dramatic kicks and punches, maybe even smashing bricks with their bare hands. Typified by the Shaolin fighting monks, this is *waijia* (pronounced whyjeea). Like much modern exercise, these external styles aim for aerobic fitness, muscular strength, speed and agility, and the training can be hard to the point of exhaustion. This kind of practice develops high levels of fitness and martial power, and – like all aerobic or strength training – can deliver a powerful mood-altering effect by rapidly moving qi and blood. However, it also comes with some potential disadvantages. It may not be suitable for the ageing body, there is an increased risk of injury, and its mood altering effects may be short-lived. Carried to extreme, it risks exhausting the body, weakening the immune system and increasing tension, and if used as self-medication for mental health problems can become addictive. As the 7th century sage Sun Simiao wrote, *"The way of nurturing life is to constantly strive for minor exertion but never become greatly fatigued and force what you cannot endure."*

Neijia – internal – yin

What is called *neijia* (pronounced nayjeea) includes qigong, the three famous internal martial arts – *taijiquan* (tai chi), *xingyiquan* and *baguazhang* – and non-Chinese practices such as yoga (which the Chinese call 'Brahmin qigong'). *Neijia* focuses on stillness, softness rather than tension, and full body-breath-mind integration. This means the mind penetrates the interior of the body – into the breath, the joints, connective tissue, muscles and bones, the core and the acupuncture channels and points. It seeks nourishment, health, wellbeing, fascial elasticity, sinew strength, soft power, resilience, balance and expansion of the mind. Movement is often synchronised with slow deep breathing, maximisising the opportunity for awareness at every level of our being and (over time) helping to resolve both physical and emotional stagnation. Compared to *waijia*, therefore, it can have a more prolonged effect on moving qi and blood and changing emotional patterns, there is minimal risk of injury, and it can be practised at any age.

Like *waijia*, however, there are potential drawbacks. It can encourage too much inward focus and be frustratingly slow for those that have profound inner stagnation or plenty of fiery yang qi (especially the young).

Integrating external and internal

Working with yinyang in our practice and daily life, we seek a fluid balance that responds to ever-changing circumstances. As our needs vary, we may find that some days we are drawn to quiet, internal practice, and on others to stronger more vigorous movements. We probably favour external practice when young and gravitate to internal practice as we age (as many *waijia* practitioners do), or choose more vigorous movement if we've been too sedentary, and more stillness if we have been over-active. For that reason, it is good to develop a variety of qigong practices and to combine them with martial arts, hiking, dancing, swimming, playing sports and so on.

Note, however, that in qigong it is best to fully absorb one style or form before learning something new.

Even within quiet and slow qigong, we can focus more internally-yin or more externally-yang. One way of doing this is to close or open our eyes. When they are closed, we withdraw from visual sensations and enter the internal landscape of the body and breath. When they are open we expand into the external landscape of birds, trees, sun, water, heaven and earth (which is why practising outdoors can be so delightful). If we are feeling constrained or depressed, it may be best to focus outwards in this way or favour vigorous and playful exercise. But if our thoughts are scattered, jumping from one thing to another, or if we are exhausted, convalescing, anxious etc. then it might be best to close our eyes, simplify our inputs and dwell in quiet and stillness.

Yinyang in qigong 3: strength and softness

"Being strong without letting strength go too far, being flexible without becoming ineffective, strength is joined to flexibility and flexibility is applied with strength." Liu I-ming, 18th century CE

Strength – yang

We all need to build and maintain sufficient strength to accomplish whatever we want to do in life. For most of us this doesn't involve anything heroic. In a varied and 'natural' life, we probably want to carry all kinds of things – children, shopping, a heavy rucksack – climb hills and stairs, push baby buggies, wheelchairs or occasionally cars, paint ceilings, dig the earth, chop wood, twist lids off jars and so on. And we want to be able to carry on doing these things as long as possible as we age.

However, without dedicated application, time is not on our side. Sarcopenia' (from the Greek 'sarx' = flesh and 'penia' = poverty) is the term used to describe the loss of muscle that characterises ageing (estimated at about one per cent a year after the age of 30 and accelerating with each passing decade) in the untended body. And as lean muscle mass diminishes, it is replaced by fat which consumes less energy. The result is that if we continue to eat as we always did, most of us steadily put on weight.

The good news, however, is that appropriate exercise can significantly slow the rate of sarcopenia, maintain strong and effective muscles and reduce the decline in metabolic activity. In fact we can build muscle at any age – right into our 80s.

It is not only muscle strength that we need to maintain, though. We also want strong sinews, strong bones and strong internal organs. The two thousand year old *Yellow Emperor's Inner Classic* spells it out clearly and ruthlessly,

"As for the back, it is the palace of that which is in the chest [i. e. heart and lungs]. When the back is curved and the shoulders drop, the palace will soon

be destroyed. As for the lower back, it is the palace of the kidneys. When a person is unable to turn and to sway, his kidneys will soon be worn out. As for the knees, they are the palaces of the sinews. When a person cannot bend and stretch and if while walking he is bent forward and leans on a stick, his sinews will soon be worn out. As for the bones, they are the palace of marrow. When a person cannot stand for long and if while walking he staggers back and forth, his bones will soon be worn out.
Those who are able to maintain strength, they live. Those who fail to maintain strength, they die."

Perhaps because I have grown vegetables for decades, I am fond of the term 'cultivation'. In the same way a garden needs constant care, the body needs to be cultivated regularly to maintain strength (alongside all the other body skills such as balance, integrated movement, flexibility, joint alignment and so on). My experience is that qigong practice which has its roots in the internal martial arts is a powerful way to achieve this. By practising a range of qigong styles (for example *baduanjin*, *taichi* qigong, five animal forms etc.) we mobilise and strengthen every joint, bone, blood vessel, nerve, fascial sheath, muscle, sinew and organ in the body.

It is especially important to strengthen the waist, lower back and legs. These are considered the domain of the Kidneys in Chinese medicine, and the vigour of the Kidneys and their stored essence (*jing*) is the ultimate determinant of how well we age and how long we live. Without cultivation, the lower back and legs usually weaken first as the body ages. Our balance deteriorates, we are more likely to stumble and fall, and we lose the effortless trust in leg agility and sure-footedness we had when we were young.

Softness – yin

"Human beings in life are soft and weak, in death are always stretched, stiff, and rigid. The myriad things, grass and plants, in life are soft and pliant, in death are withered and dry. Therefore it is said, 'Stiffness and rigidity are indicators of death; softness, weakness, are indicators of life'." Daodejing, 4th century BCE

There are many unique features of the traditional Chinese self-cultivation tradition, and one of these is the emphasis on softness. This dates back at least as far as the 2500 year old *Daodejing*. Written during the chaotic Warring States period of Chinese history, it has been interpreted both as a profound philosophical work and a manual on how to survive dangerous times (go with the flow, keep a quiet mind, maintain a humble position etc.), taking as its model the reed which bends with the wind rather than the mighty oak.

Nowhere is this principle found more clearly than in the principle of *song* in the practice of tai chi (*taijiquan*), other internal martial arts and qigong. *Song* means soft, loose, relaxed etc. and applies not only to the body but to the mind as well. Those who practise *song* know how difficult it is, indeed it is much easier to tense up than to stay soft – especially when we are facing a difficult task or an opponent. We could say that developing *song* is a lifetime task but its benefits are immense and apply to every aspect of life.

It is hard to think of any activity – singing, talking, hitting a tennis ball, running for Olympic gold, writing, brushing teeth, having sex – that goes better with tense muscles or a tense mind. Tension impairs integrated and aligned flowing movement (the secret of seemingly effortless strength), unnecessarily activates ‘parasitic’ muscles (i.e. those that are not needed in the task, like clenching the teeth when trying to thread a needle), and reduces free flow of qi, blood and body fluids through the soft tissue and blood vessels. The simple fact is that it is much easier to activate muscle activity than to inhibit it.

Integrating yin and yang – strength and softness

As Liu I-ming emphasises above, we need to combine strength with softness, and that becomes one of the most interesting challenges in practice. We can take qigong standing meditation as an example. It is practised in a variety of postures, some of which could be described as stress positions. The knees stay bent, loading the thigh muscles, and the arms are often raised, soon revealing any habitual tightness in the shoulders, neck and upper back. We have to find a way to maintain our posture (strong, open, rooted, aligned) while constantly practising release and softness, even when the position becomes uncomfortable or painful. If we relax too much, we lose postural integrity. If we over-tighten our muscles to maintain the posture, we worsen the discomfort.

The same principle applies right through qigong practice. When we engage in some of stronger styles like drawing the the bow or punching in *baduanjin*, have we gone for a kind of false strength by tightening muscles throughout the body, or on the other hand have we failed to commit to the movement and become flaccid and ineffectual?

I would say that working with strength and softness in qigong is a constant (but welcome) challenge and one that feeds through into many other aspects of our lives. In work, in relationships, in self-cultivation are we pushing too hard or not enough?

Daoism teaches the art of *wuwei* or non-action. Often (mis)understood as complete disengagement from human affairs it is better understood (in the words of Sinologist Jean François Billeter) as a *“state of perfect knowledge of the reality of the situation, perfect efficaciousness and the realization of a perfect economy of energy”*, or as is written in the 3rd century BCE *Annals of Lu Buwei*,

“Were the strongman Wuhuo to pull the tail of an ox so hard that the tail broke off and he exhausted all his strength, he would not be able to move the ox because he would be contravening the natural direction of the ox. But were a lad a mere five cubits tall to pull the ox by its nose ring, the ox would follow where he led because he would be according with the natural direction of the ox.”

In my own practice I like to contemplate and learn from water. It is powerful enough to overcome almost any obstacle, but when we try to grasp it – to feel its strength – we find only softness.

Yinyang in qigong 4: coiling and uncoiling

“For all [to practice] *this Way:*
You must coil, you must contract,
You must uncoil, you must expand,
You must be firm, you must be regular [in this practice].
Nei-Yeh (Inward Training), China, 4th century BCE[1]

Neigong/qigong

One of the key characteristics of the Chinese ‘internal’ mind-breath-bodywork tradition, is the practice of lengthening or uncoiling (yang) and settling back or coiling (yin). These movements are performed through the whole elastic body, slowly (in synchronicity with lower abdominal breathing), mindfully, with the minimum of muscular tension and not to our full stretched capacity. Indeed stretching feels like the wrong word since stretching to the limit starts to generate tension. Like many things this follows the Daoist idea of ‘stopping before completion’ (for example stopping eating before we are full or stopping exercise before we are exhausted).

As the *Daodejing* says, *“Better stop short than fill to the brim. Oversharpen the blade and the edge will soon blunt.”*

When teaching qigong, I find the images of the ‘elastic body’, an accordion expanding and closing, or soft waves washing onto and retreating from a sandy beach useful to convey the idea and the feeling.

The fascia

“Fascia forms a continuous tensional network throughout the human body, covering and connecting every single organ, every muscle, and even every nerve or tiny muscle fiber.”

Fascia: The Tensional Network of the Human Body, 2012[2]

Until the latter part of the twentieth century, anatomists tended to consider the animal body in terms of a machine, made up of individual parts that performed specific functions. Nowhere was this more evident than in its perception of body movement, where individual muscles – alone or in combination – were seen to move individual bones and joints. In athletes and body builders, muscular training increasingly sought to isolate these muscles and find ways – using tailored techniques and machines – to train and strengthen them.

In anatomical studies, it was taken for granted that in order to isolate the really important structures – muscles, organs, nerves, blood vessels, bones etc. it was necessary to cut through and push to the side the webby layers of elastic connective tissue that surround every one of these, and indeed permeate every part of the body.

Yet in an astonishing turnaround, this largely ignored, discarded material – the soft fibrous connective tissue within the body that goes under the broad title of the fascia – has become one of the most studied anatomical and physiological phenomena of living bodies.

Fascia has been defined as the *'biological fabric that holds us together'*[3]. It enables the body to respond as a 'tensegrity structure' (when one part moves, every other part moves in response), to maintain alignment, balance and structure. This underpins the growing realisation that the kind of exercise which best maintains the health of the fascia is one which moves the body as an integrated whole.

When we are young, the fascial tissues show clear folds or undulations which have been compared to elastic springs (or an accordion). This elasticity – which is unrelated to simple muscle strength – gives young humans and young animals springiness and bounce (think of a gazelle's astonishing leaps on the most delicate and fragile looking legs). As we age, the fascia lose this springiness and the undulations flatten. And when we sit for long periods, or distort our physical alignment and structure through poor posture, repetitive work or leisure activities, patterns are imprinted on the fascia. They no longer glide against each other but form adhesions and become matted, firm and overly dense. This is like the transition from bouncy new wool to thick and tough felt. The consequence is pain, impaired movement, stiffness and poor health. It could therefore be said that as far as movement is concerned, our bodies are as young as our fascia[4].

The good news is that – like muscles – the condition of the fascia can be improved by movement. But the kind of movement that maintains the flexibility of fascia is of a particular type. Pumping iron or cycling will have relatively little effect, and while aerobic exercise will influence the fascia more, the best exercises incorporate fluid, slow, dynamic movements, rhythmically coiling (yin) and uncoiling (yang) the connective tissue, using a wide variety of movements (rather than one-dimensional ones such as on a rowing machine), spiralling and twisting inwards and outwards, upwards and downwards through the whole body. The aim is a strong, flexible, youthful body that is less likely to be injured when we play sports, lift and carry, and perform normal daily activities and work[5].

Regularly practising these ways of moving can re-programme the fascia but it is not a fast process and can take up to twenty-four months[6]. This might explain the relatively low take-up of qigong and the internal martial arts in Western countries. It takes time to experience the rich rewards of these traditions – at least compared to the rapid and more immediate payoff of strength training, aerobic training and other forms of exercise, including yoga.

The acupuncture perspective

" … there is no part of the body, no kind of tissue, no single cell, that is not supplied by the channels [meridians] … The channels penetrate the zangfu and the extraordinary fu [i.e. the organs] in the deepest levels of the body and connect with the skin, muscles, flesh, tendons, and bones, the head, body

and limbs, and the sense organs, linking all the tissues and structures of the body into an integrated whole."

A Manual of Acupuncture, 1998[7]

When prospective acupuncturists begin their studies, they can be overwhelmed with the task of learning the pathways of the many different channels and the hundreds of acupuncture points that lie along them. In this endeavour, however, we risk losing the forest for the trees and forget the entire, complex web of primary, connecting, extraordinary and minute channels and vessels. The image of the body as an elastic web of fascial tissue can be very helpful in understanding the otherwise strange practice of attuning to yinyang by softly lengthening and contracting through the whole body – sometimes for hours on end. But for acupuncturists (for whom invigorating the channels is their daily bread and butter) the image of activating the entire channel/vessel network in the body through mindful movement can be even more profound.

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[1] (trans. Harold D. Roth).

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