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, qigong (“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 designed to allow the body to heal itself.

Graceful Focus

Watch two people doing qigong 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 qigong and tai chi different? For starters, qigong (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 movement/stillness.

Qigong and tai chi have developed that tend to resemble qigong. 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 qigong.

Moving Towards Health

According to the Institute of Integral Qigong and Tai Chi (IIQTC) in Santa Barbara, California (www.iiqtc.org), both qigong 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).

“Qigong 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 Qigong Institute in Los Altos, California (www.qigonginstitute.org).

Not only do qigong 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.

Qigong and tai chi also differ in their effects. Practice qigong’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 qigong 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, improve symptoms and quality of life among older men who have benign prostate enlargement (Arthritis Care Research 11/11, Evidence-Based Complimentary and Alternative Medicine 2012 Article 624692).

Which practice you choose depends on personal preference and physical capacity. “Qigong 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 qigong 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