

Qigong: mindful movement made in China



By Dorene Internicola
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NEW YORK (Reuters Life!) – If yoga is all the rage, can Qigong be far behind?

Sometimes called Chinese yoga, Qigong is a mind-body practice that melds slow graceful movements, mental focus and deep abdominal breathing to boost and balance a person's vital energy, or "qi".

As China's star rises in the west, devotees believe this 5,000-year-old energy cultivation system is poised to become the new kid on the block among rat racers hungry for a more serene form of fitness.

"As China becomes more of a player in the world, Chinese practice is becoming more mainstream," said Matthew Cohen, creator of the Tai Chi & Qi Gong Basics DVD, "just as yoga became popular when the Beatles went to India."

Cohen, an instructor at Sacred Energy Arts in Santa Monica, California, said unlike in India, yoga in the west has come to favor the athletic at the expense of the meditative.

"The world is getting more crowded, cars and computers getting faster," he said. "Qigong is about going slower, so internally you create space."

Tom Rogers, president of the Qigong Institute, a nonprofit educational organization, said Qigong is the precursor to all Chinese energy practices.

"Tai Chi is the most well known moving form of Qigong. Kung Fu is also a form of Qigong," Rogers said from his home in Los Altos, California

Rogers added that the idea of energy cultivation is foreign to westerners but common to other cultures.

"Look at $e=mc^2$," Rogers said of Einstein's insight that matter and energy are different forms of the same thing.

"In the west we look at mass," he said. "Western physics made weapons. The east looks at energy."

The slow, spiral exercises of Qigong, such as Rolling the Ball or Wave Hands in the Cloud, require no equipment, can be done anywhere, and are easy to learn.

"I call it getting an MBA: Movement, Breathing and Awareness," Rogers said. "One is adjusting your posture so energy flow is better; two is slow, deep, abdominal breathing; three is awareness, or trying to get thoughts out of your head."

Balance, posture, breath control and relaxation are among the benefits of Qigong, according to Jessica Matthews, an exercise physiologist with the American Council on Exercise.

She said some research trials have also reported statistically significant decreases in the incidence of stroke, decreased blood pressure, and increases in bone mineral density and improved effectiveness of cancer therapy among practitioners.

"Exercise is not just about going on the treadmill or lifting weights," Matthews explained.

Rogers said as you become more adept, the benefits increase.

"Like an onion you peel the layers back and there's more and more to it: movements are more fluid, posture is better, energy is flowing, breathing is more efficient with movement," he said. "As your awareness deepens you're distracted by less and less."

He added that every chronic illness on the planet is affected by stress.

"Connect with that healer within. Turn that on," Rogers added.