

The ancient Chinese exercise that is suddenly cool

A 5,000-year-old practice called qigong (“chee-gong”) is said to be the secret to longevity. Anna Maxted finds out why

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Kate Beckinsale, left, Iggy Pop and Gwyneth Paltrow practise qigong

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It’s the latest way to de-stress, boost fitness and improve longevity — yet it’s 5,000 years old. Qigong is a Chinese holistic practice of slow, low-impact movements that incorporate posture, breathing and focus to cultivate a smooth energy flow through the body. It calms the mind, improves wellbeing and fitness, and its fans include the actresses Julia Roberts, Kate Beckinsale and Gwyneth

Paltrow, the golfer Tiger Woods, and the musicians Iggy Pop and Gary Lightbody of Snow Patrol.

Two books on the subject are being published in the next few months. Classes and workshops are popping up at fashionable gyms and studios such as the Triyoga chain and Indaba yoga studio in London, and there are retreats in Ibiza. The names of the best instructors are passed around CEOs in the fashion and beauty worlds in hushed tones. The most sought after teachers (known as masters) are Sifu Yan Long Jiang, known as “Long”, and Dr Hung D Tran, who is also recommended on Paltrow’s website Goop. So why the sudden popularity?

Katherine Allen, author of *The Qigong Bible* and an instructor who has practised it for 30 years, teaches in Kent. She says that it has three main benefits: it improves health — mental and physical, involving every system in the body; it increases martial abilities and strength; and it promotes spiritual development.

Allen also practises yoga and t’ai chi. “They’re all longevity arts,” she says. “Very good if you want to stay young, healthy, sane and relaxed.” But there are differences. “Qigong is mostly standing. With yoga there are many postures on the floor and they’re usually static.” Yoga has a meditative element, but not the martial aspect. Rather like t’ai chi, qigong is traditionally practised outside at dawn or dusk. “[T’ai chi] uses all of the same principles and is like a long flowing series of qigong moves,” she says.

Unlike yoga, qigong is suitable for all ages because there’s no impact or jarring, Allen says. “Qigong sets the spine in a very safe position. There aren’t any headstands.” Good posture is an integral part of each move. Osteopaths love it, she says, because the spine is always extended.

A class starts with gentle, diaphragmatic breathing — slow, relaxed and silent. “This calms your nervous system,” Allen says. “You need to get your breathing right before your mind can settle. In the East they say your brain is always

chattering to itself — meaningless, trivial stuff, like chattering monkeys. The idea is to still your chattering monkeys.”

She sometimes plays music, but if she teaches outside the soundtrack is “the birds and the wind and the trees”. You wear thin-soled shoes to retain a sense of connection to the earth. The moves (about 3,000) are simple. “Very often the movements are flowing,” she says, “though there are some static moves where you hold the pose. There are also balancing moves.”

A beginner might hold a stance for a minute or repeat a move seven times. As strength and mental focus improve, you might hold it for five minutes. If you’re athletic, moves can be scaled up in intensity. There are individual moves and sets.

A class might incorporate 25 moves, and a beginner starts with, for instance, cloud hands. “This is a move in horse stance — your knees are bent outwards as if around the belly of a horse,” Allen says. “You move your arms in a flowing way as though they’re moving through clouds.” Or there’s bouncing the ball, in which you move your hand and your leg up “as though it’s lifting by magic” and then you put your foot down — breathing in on the way up and out on the way down. “It’s very slow and mesmerising.”

Unlike in strength training, you don’t hold tension in your body. “You are relaxed, and your arms float and flow — there is no tension in your arms, but neither are they limp and floppy,” Allen says. “Some of the stances are just as demanding as a kettlebell workout. But the idea is that you can strengthen your body and still remain calm and relaxed.”

Qigong is the perfect foil if your exercise is high intensity. “If you’re a runner or a weightlifter, it’s very good to balance that with something calming,” Allen says. “The flow makes you happy.

“At the end [of a session], we sometimes do a standing meditation. This calms the body and the nervous system, so you should walk out of the session feeling more relaxed and happier than when you walked in. There’s a psychological aspect to it that you’re not going to get with kettlebell training.”



Walking on clouds

1 This is a circle-walking exercise. Stand with feet shoulder-width apart, breathing deeply and slowly.

2 Lift up your right hand and imagine a piece of string attached across your body to lift up your left knee.

3 Lower your right hand as you lightly touch your left heel to the ground.

4 Roll your left foot down and transfer your weight to your left leg. Roll your right foot up; lower your right hand.

5 Raise your left hand and your right leg.

6 Lower your left hand as you lightly set down your right heel.

7 Roll your right foot down and transfer your weight to your right leg. Repeat the circle; it will take two to five minutes.

Health benefits Great for all-round strength and balance



Pushing mountains

1 Bend both knees, with legs slightly wider than shoulder-width. Keep your back vertical. Have your hands in fists at your hips.

2 Sink down into a low stance, as you push your right hand forward to finish with your palm facing away and fingers pointing up. Breathe out as you push your palm forward.

3 Breathe in, retract your right hand and make a fist at your hips as you return to your original stance.

4 Repeat with the left hand. Repeat the sequence seven times.

Health benefits Mobilises all the joints in the body and strengthens the arms, shoulders and legs



Exchanging heaven and earth

1 Stand with feet shoulder-width apart and stretch your right arm up with palm upwards, and your left arm with palm downwards, in the centre of your body.

Breathe in.

2 Bring your hands towards each other until they are at chest height, turned down.

Breathe in as your hands come towards each other at chest height.

3 Stretch your left arm up, palm towards the sky, and your right hand down, palm towards the earth. Repeat the sequence seven times.

Health benefits Improves shoulder and arm flexibility, as well as breath co-ordination



Holding a ball

Stand with legs shoulder-width apart. Transfer weight to your left leg, and bend your right knee. Imagine that you are holding a ball. Hold for two to five minutes, then repeat on the other side.

Health benefits Builds strength and balance. Regular practice builds determination, patience and calmness



Standing on one leg with balloons

Place your hands at hip height as though they are resting on imaginary balloons. Stand on your left leg with knee slightly bent and lift your right knee as high as possible. Point the toes downward. Hold this for between 30 seconds and two minutes. Repeat on the other leg.

Health benefits This exercise trains balance, which reduces the risk of falling



Seated pushing the sky and twisting

1 Sit cross-legged, interlock your fingers and push the heels of your palms upwards. Breathe out. Hold this position for a minute or more, breathing softly.

2 Twist to the left as far as is comfortable. Hold this position for a minute or more. Breathe out as you twist, then softly while holding the position.

3 Repeat the twist and hold to the right. To end the sequence bring your hands down to rest in your lap. Circle your shoulders to ease any muscle strain.

Health benefits Improves flexibility in the shoulders, spine, waist and hips. Also strengthens the upper body

Exercises extracted from *The Qigong Bible* by Katherine Allen (published by Godsfield Press, £14.99, octopusbooks.co.uk)

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