What Qi Gong Taught One Doctor About Healing
by Cynthia Li, MD

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I first met Master Mingtong Gu 8 years ago. A friend had invited me to his studio in Petaluma, CA, for a qigong workshop. Qi (“chee”) means life-force energy, gong means cultivation. Slow, easy movements. Low risk enough. And evidence-based. I was a doctor of internal medicine, trained to think critically and methodically, cautious of anything that might fall into the realm of “miracles.”

But I was also desperate. I had suffered for years with complex autoimmune illnesses, including Hashimoto’s thyroiditis and chronic fatigue syndrome—the shadow conditions of Western medicine. Despite conventional treatments, my health continued to worsen. I was bed-bound for 6 months, housebound for 2 years. So at the workshop, when Master Gu encouraged us to practice every day, I figured I had nothing to lose.

With my health brittle and my children young, I started with 15 minutes twice a day. First it was sound healing. Once I had enough energy and stability to stand for the movement forms, I began noticing, after years of chronic vertigo, that I could even practice with my eyes closed. This got me motivated.

Laboriously, But Gratefully

I committed to practicing 45 minutes every morning. As I understood it then, mind-body practices were just another slice of the total pie of all the other health-promoting changes I made through integrative and functional medicine: nutrient-dense diets, a rainbow of vitamins and minerals, a pocketful of herbs, sleep hygiene, gut healing, acupuncture, cranial osteopathy, you name it. I even learned to develop my intuition to help me navigate the maze of choices.

My health improved in measurable ways. No need to urinate throughout the night. An increase in appetite. Stability in weight. A lessening of vertigo, aches and fatigue. I was laboriously but gratefully moving toward health.

Then a second crisis hit. My entire stress system crashed, leaving me on the edge of life for 3 months. It was doubly terrifying because some of my experiences could be characterized as “mystical” or “energetic,” and I wanted no part in them. Was I not already on the forefront of internal medicine, integrative and functional medicine, and intuitive medicine? Why was this happening?

As my life energy drained out of me, I knew I didn’t need more information. I needed, in fact, a miracle.
I didn’t have energy to do more. So I did less, but went deeper. One of the primary things areas I dove into was qigong. From the couch, I practiced for 2-3 hours a day, simple hand movements, visualizations, and chants. I bought Master Gu’s book on qigong theory and Luke Chan’s 101 Miracles of Natural Healing, poring through them like medical textbooks, trying to rewire my brain to new possibilities, new patterns. The books reminded me of how our bodies store the subconscious, complementing what I already knew of epigenetics (the science of how our thoughts, emotions, and activities inform the expression of our DNA) and neuroplasticity (how the same factors can rewire our nervous system).

In the first round of integrative and root-cause medicine, I apparently hadn’t gone deep enough. Down below the environmental and social factors that cause disease or promote health, lies this subtle but powerful qi field. Qi surrounds and infuses everyone and everything, seen and unseen. Its potential, however, depends on two things: the capacity to tap into this qi field with your consciousness (the mind and heart), and the ability to activate its flow within your trillions of cells (the body). So qigong—a practice that wasn’t integrative per se, but integrated in mind, body, spirit at once—wasn’t a mere slice of the health pie. It had the potential to be the whole pie itself.

A few months in, something shifted in me. I went from doing the practice as transactional—I should practice in order to get better—to transformational—I want to practice because I feel the inner flow when I connect to the energy source of life. Qigong came to feel like eating. If I went too long without it, I felt hungry for it. After all, what is food but a source of energy? The same goes for qi.

Too Good to Be True?

Since the deep dive into qigong, those who have witnessed the trajectory of my healing journey have called it a radical remission. It defies all medical explanation. My energy is robust. I travel and eat with much greater freedom. My sleep is deeper. And the complex prescriptions have distilled into golden simplicity. Taken together with nutrition, supplements, medications when necessary, and energy healing, I was able to taper completely off my thyroid medication, which I’d taken for 14 years. In short, when we connect to the life-force energy field, healing can happen as if a side-effect.

Last year, my family took a rafting trip in the desert canyons of eastern Oregon. For over a decade, this kind of trip was unimaginable for me. This time I went. And I didn’t just go, I paddled through the rapids, hiked the shale hillsides, camped under the ebony sky, feeling both like me and not-me. Perhaps this was a truer me than I’d ever known. My husband couldn’t grasp what had happened. Because on the outside, it seemed I’d been doing things “right” all along.

Just last week, a friend asked me if the mysterious qi field made better sense to me now. “It makes as much sense as quantum science does,” I replied, shaking my head. “If you understand how particles can be in two different places at the same time, or how, as we go down, increasingly more microscopically into our cells, that there’s no hard form at all, only subatomic haze—that’s what we are, a walking, talking cloud of subatomic haze—if that makes sense to you, then qi will make sense to you, too.”

It’s not a matter of blind trust. Rather, of direct experience. I experience, therefore I know. Qigong has something to do with sacred geometry: the movements, sound vibrations, and
consciousness practices can activate in our bodies basic patterns of life, like spirals and pyramids and infinity waves. They can also activate energy codes, which inform our bodies the same way genetic codes do. And by going directly into our bodies, we can transform entrenched subconscious patterns and connect to our truer, whole selves.

If we consider ourselves separate and autonomous from the rest of the universe, these concepts might sound far-fetched. If we consider ourselves integral and interconnected, these will sound perfectly ordinary. What I’ve gathered is that nature’s laws are immutable. What we call miracles don’t defy these laws. They just access laws higher than we've previously realized.

Join us for a special conversation and workshop with Master Mingtong Gu, an international teacher of Wisdom Healing (Zhineng) Qigong this Wednesday, August 5, 2020. More details and RSVP information here.