

Cancer Patients: Empower Yourself with the Qigong Edge

By Bob Ellal

What happens when a cancer patient has repeated relapses of the disease? How does one keep a positive attitude and “re-load” mentally, emotionally and physically with each reoccurrence? A daily practice of qigong with Chinese internal energy exercises can help reinforce one’s will and positive attitude. This helps keep cancer patients physically strong to weather the withering effects of chemotherapy and/or radiation treatments.

In 1991 I was diagnosed with Stage IV lymphoma cancer of the bone—a potential death sentence. Against all odds I beat the original occurrence of the disease and I thought I was cured. Unfortunately the cancer relapsed three times over the next five years and I endured two bone marrow transplants as part of treatment.

Instinctively I realized I had to find a way to help myself survive. I read everything I could about people who had survived “terminal” diagnoses and found one common thread. They employed the mind/body connection as a way to help them beat their diseases. I read the works of Dr. Carl Simonton, an oncologist who helped people survive by employing meditation and visualization techniques. I started meditating and visualizing my immune system killing cancer cells in my body.

But when my cancer relapsed for the third time after my first bone marrow transplant, I realized I had to find a more effective way to help myself survive. My oncologist told me the cancer would probably relapse continuously until the disease or the chemotherapy treatment killed me.

Through further research I discovered qigong, which means *energy study*. It's an ancient Chinese art used to bring health to the body, calm to the mind, and power to the martial arts. Qigong is based on the same theory as acupuncture. There are energy pathways—meridians and channels—that flow throughout the body. When energy, or chi, runs smoothly in these pathways, good health is maintained. When energy becomes blocked or stagnant, illness follows. Through various combinations of breathing, postures and movements, qigong attempts to keep energy pathways open.

How Qigong Calms the Mind and Boosts the Immune System

Think about this. You step outside to put a bag of garbage in one of the cans. Then you turn the corner to where you store the barrels and stop dead in your tracks. A black

bear has his head stuck in one of the cans. You begin breathing rapidly shallowly, from the chest, as fear for your own life pervades you. Your mind races as you temporarily are frozen in place. This bear could tear your head off. You gather your composure and walk gingerly back to the house.

When you perceived danger your body reacted with the fight-or-flight response. It engages the sympathetic nervous system, one of the two components of the autonomic nervous system. Your body floods with adrenaline from your adrenal glands as you prepare to confront the threat to your life.

As the threat passes you breathe deeply and the parasympathetic nervous system becomes engaged: heart rate slows, blood pressure returns to normal, adrenal glands stop pumping adrenaline into your system. You are calm and your body can return to normal operations, such as digestion. Thoughts slow to normal.

The fight-or-flight response is vital for short-term situations such as when you meet up with a black bear or worse, a grizzly. But if you are confronting a serious disease or condition such as cancer or PTSD, your fear will trigger this response continuously flooding your body with adrenaline and other chemicals such as cortisol. This effect clutters the playing field. You cannot heal properly as these chemicals interfere with the normal action of the immune system.

If you're fighting cancer, you can manage the pervasive sense of fear you experience by learning to breathe deeply, expanding your abdomen and filling the lungs from the bottom up. This practice kicks in the parasympathic nervous system, which keeps you calm.

And there's another tremendous benefit from abdominal breathing. The lymphatic system, which relies on respiration and muscular action to work (it has no pump, such as the heart pumping the blood), will work much more efficiently. The lymphatic system contains vital elements of the immune system, such as the bone marrow (the blood factory) and the thymus gland that kicks out T-cells, the body's natural killer cells which destroy cancer and other invaders.

This is especially valuable when one is sick and weak from heavy chemotherapy or radiation. One can't run a marathon or pump iron. But one can employ the static postures and gentle movements of qigong and the abdominal breathing that is its core.

I learned deep, abdominal breathing as the first step in my practice of qigong. It is also a vital component in other meditative and energy arts such as yoga, tai chi chuan and transcendental meditation. To practice it expand your abdomen slowly as you breathe, focusing on filling the lungs with air from the bottom up.

Qigong: Fusing Mind/Body/Spirit

When you combine abdominal breathing with qigong postures or gentle movements, you truly engage the three components that constitute a human being: mind, body and spirit. You get away from fear and anxiety and empower yourself to participate in your recovery from cancer.

Thousands of qigong exercises exist that have been developed by the Chinese over the past couple of millennia. Which one is right for you? The best approach is to learn simple qigong postures and movements. One can get the benefits of practice in short order.

You can also do some research and find a reputable local tai chi chuan teacher. Tai chi chuan is the most sophisticated form of qigong ever developed and also a martial art when taught properly as well as a health maintenance system. That being said, tai chi chuan can encompass over 100 postures/movements and can take over a year just to learn the form. All tai chi chuan teachers include simple qigong as part of their curriculum to lend power to the tai chi form. Eight Pieces of Brocade and 18 Shaolin Lohan qigong are just two of the simpler forms of qigong.

One of the most popular and ancient forms of qigong is standing post meditation. It's simple, but profound. Standing post gets its name from its posture. The practitioner stands as though he or she is a post rooted into the ground, knees slightly bent, arms held in an arc in front of the chest. This posture is known as Embrace the Tree and its benefits are legion. According to Taoist master Mantak Chia, Embrace the Tree stimulates the lymph nodes in the groin, armpits and back of knees. The deep abdominal breathing practiced while holding the posture also helps propel fluid through the lymphatic system. The lymphatic system removes wastes and toxins from all the body's cells and also contains antibodies. And holding the arms in an arc in front of the chest stimulates the thymus gland, which lies underneath the sternum and manufactures T-cells that kill cancer, viruses and other invaders.

As a former martial artist, standing post meditation is the qigong I most gravitated to as it's used both for health and to build a strong "frame" for martial arts. I've been

practicing it every day since cancer personally entered my life. Now I've been clear of cancer and in good health, except for skeletal damage, since 1994!

For More Information

National Qigong Association nqa.org

Health Qigong USA healthqigongassociationusa.org

Qigong Association of America www.qi.org

Master Lawrence Tan www.tandao.com

Bob Ellal is a four-time cancer survivor and practitioner of Eastern internal energy arts. He has worked as a writer/editor for a division of Simon & Schuster, Inc. as well as a writer at Aetna Life & Casualty, Inc. Together with co-author Master Lawrence Tan their book "Energy Warriors—Overcoming Cancer and Crisis with the Power of Qigong" was published by Divine Arts Media in 2013. You can find more information at <http://www.tandao.com/energy-warriors/>.

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