

BREATHING
LIFE
BACK
INTO
THE
PARALYZED

(by Xu Nan)

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BREATHING LIFE BACK INTO THE PARALYZED

The master is the medicine in qigong. He possesses excess vital or biological energy and can impart it on others to heal. Wan Sujian's qigong can make crippled people walk again. Researchers cannot explain in scientific terms why this is so. But from experiments Wan has conducted on crippled piglets, he has proved that the enigmatic treatment he administers has nothing to do with superstition nor the power of will.

Even for most Chinese, let alone foreigners, qigong is a mysterious - thing. What exactly is it? An exercise? A belief? A philosophy? A phenomenon? Medicine, magic or trickery?

One thing is for sure, it is misunderstood by many. It's a topic of chitchat within families as sons ask mothers why they get up at the crack of dawn, go to the park and stand statue-like still under trees in local parks — just breathing and sometimes flapping their arms.

That is the key: breathing. For qigong translates as "a system of deep breathing. But it's not a newfangled health kick. Qigong was probably invented about 25 centuries ago by the philosopher Lao Zi who lived from 604-531 BC.

Perhaps the reason why qigong is so mysterious is that it has many branches and applications. Masters use it for improving health in general, curing ailments or even foreseeing the future.

Zhang Tongshou speaks positively about qigong, about what it's done for him in the past, not what's going to happen in the future. "Qigong has given me hope after a terrible accident five years says the 53-year-old Beijing resident.

The nightmare happened in October 1991 when he fell at work and broke his back (the tenth vertebra). Surgery saved his life, but it was a life in a wheelchair. Operations could not repair his severely damaged spinal cord and nerves.

Zhang had no option but accept his disability. He spent the days sitting at home watching television. That proved to be his fortune.

He saw a program featuring the qigong practices of Dr. Wan Sujian in which a man seemingly condemned to a wheelchair for life was helped to walk. Zhang set about finding that doctor at the Beijing Institution of Medical Qigong.

Recalling his high hopes. Zhang says he half-expected Dr. Wan to perform some kind of miracle. " After a year's treatment I realized that qigong wasn't quack magic. It's a combination of traditional and modern therapies, but it really does work, gradually." Zhang can now walk at a pace of one kilometer per hour. Slow, but a real gift for a man who thought he'd never walk again.

Master Qualities

The man who gave the gift was Wan Sujian, 44. His main tools are his hands, or more accurately his palms.

They look thicker than those of ordinary men. The center of the palms have acupoints termed Laogong from where qigong masters release their internal qi, or vital energy. "I regard qi as a kind of biological energy - it exists in everyone, weak or strong, and it's this force that determines the health and longevity of each one of us."

People with large amounts of qi can pass it on to others. This is one form of qigong treatment, and the kind that Wan himself practices. Once transmitted, it dredges the recipient's jingluo, or meridian system of channels and collaterals, along which vital energy circulates. Another method of qigong is self-administered — the practitioner teaches the patient techniques to enable self practice.

Wan says that the outgoing qi radiated by the practitioner enables the patient to gradually drive out distracting thoughts and relax. As the qi flows through the patient's channels, it improves the responsiveness of the nervous system, helping to heal in the process, and reinforcing one's ability to resist disease.

In the clinic Wan practices as follows. The patient lies on a bed, is suspended, sits or stands, depending on his condition. The qigong master stands about one meter away, often flanked by his students.

When the qigong master starts to release qi, he stretches his arms outward. Then he begins to move his hands slowly but forcefully to gather up energy and transmit it to the patient. Sometimes the master will circle the patient, but he never actually touches him.

Recipient's Feelings

How does a patient feel when subjected to qigong Zhang Ze, a 61-year old, describes it thus: "Very quickly I felt a kind of vibrating warmth, a bit like electricity, moving through my body. I began to shake a little, then quiver quite a lot. I couldn't stop myself. I also felt as if I was under the influence of magnetism. Then, when the master withdrew his arms, all the feelings stopped. It was so powerful."

Zhang sought Wan's help after having her esophagus largely removed with cancer. This tube, between the throat and the stomach, was reduced to just half-a-centimeter in diameter. That meant she could only drink a small amount of milk for each meal. She kept on with qigong for two years and over that time her ability to eat has improved remarkably and she now feels much better.

Dr. Wan gives qigong treatment along with other forms of therapy including acupuncture, massage, acupoints drug-injections and digital acupoints pressure as well as electrotherapy and magnetic-therapy.

He says that qigong is not a cure-all but is very effective as part of a treatment package particularly in cases of paraplegia for which Wan rates his work as effective in more than 84 percent of cases.

Catastrophic Beginnings

Wan entered the medical world as a result of catastrophe. Back in 1976 he led a military rescue group in to relief of Tangshan, the city in Hebei Province struck by a devastating earthquake. The tremor killed 240,000 and injured 160,000 others. Most injuries involved the crushing of limbs under fallen masonry, many of which resulted in paraplegia. From that dreadful day in 1976 Wan has faced the challenge of helping people walk again. After instruction from qigong masters. Wan realized that he had the ability to generate powerful qi himself. He also realized that this method of treatment was particularly effective for unblocking the jingluo (meridian system of channels and collaterals) and thus repairing the damaged nerves of paraplegics. While understanding the traditional practice of qigong. Wan experimented in subjecting patients to heavier doses of it — simply by having other qigong practitioners work alongside him.

To this end, he decided to recruit, train and manage his own group of practitioners. He sought students from poor, remote areas where medical care was hardly sufficient. He also took patients' children as students.

They underwent long, hard training programs involving studies of both Chinese and Western medicine and then qigong itself. Students had to keep themselves physically fit. After eight years of such preparations, the first batch of students earned their right to be qigong masters.

Maintaining Qigong Ability

Wan stresses that a master's hard work never stops. To maintain their skills they must train, but not overwork. His doctors train twice a day, getting up at 5 a.m.. to exercise outdoors, no matter what the weather or season. The same training is repeated at night. This physical fitness regime surprises many people. They tend to think qigong is some kind of psychological treatment like hypnotism. Wan explains: "I think qi is a material in the form of a transmitted message. If the qigong master sends out the right qi it will be able to work on the right part of the patient's body and open up their clogged jingluo. But if the message is wrong it can seriously disturb the biological order of the patient"

Pig Experiments

To prove his theory. Wan did something no other Chinese qigong master had done before. He conducted some experiments on animals.

Eighteen pigs were divided into three groups: A, B and C. They were all four months old and were genetically similar: all had the same father, but different mothers. The animals had their spinal cords injured in the same way.

Group-A pigs were given immediate treatment. The frequency was three times a day for the first week, then twice a day for the rest of the time until 89 days had passed.

Group-B pigs commenced treatment later, a week after injury. But as with Group-A pigs they were treated three times a day, then twice a day. This continued for 84 days.

Group-C pigs received no treatment.

Seventeen pigs survived. The six in Group-A were all able to walk. Two of them could even jump and run. Five animals in Group-B could stand up, with one of them being able to move and jump. None of the pigs in Group-C could stand up.

The effectiveness of treatment in the experiment speaks for itself. Dr. Wan says: "It's a pity that we can't explain exactly why qigong heals. But the pig test shows qigong has nothing to do with psychological suggestion or superstition."

Wan has developed different methods of qigong to treat paraplegia, cerebral thrombosis, semiparalysis, traumatic ailments, infantile cerebral palsy, high blood pressure, and diseases of the central nervous system.

In recognition of these effective forms of qigong, Wan has won many accolades from home and abroad. He is regarded as one of the most influential qigong masters in the world and he co-founded the Beijing Institution of Medical Qigong. It is both a hospital and a school for the training and study of future masters.

Many of Wan's admirers are foreigners, proving they are undeterred by the mysteries of Chinese culture and its qigong. Irv Givot, a 51-year-old chiropractic doctor from Oregon in the United States, says:

"It's true that we don't fully understand why qigong works, but when men first discovered that radio waves could carry sound they didn't understand that either."

Givot first came to Beijing to study under Wan in 1993 and, pleased with the results of taking his newly acquired skills back to the U.S., he has returned to China several times since to learn more knowledge and skills.

Foreign Master

A most remarkable foreign qigong success story involves Dr. Richard Mayfield. He received the shocking news that his niece was comatose and being kept alive by machine in a Wisconsin hospital. Mayfield immediately boarded an airplane in Minneapolis, practicing the techniques he'd learned from Wan during the flight. As soon as he got to his niece's bedside he started to release qi.

"In ten minutes the monitor showed that her brain activity was resuming," says Mayfield, "and, after a rest, I treated her for a further 20 minutes — then she opened her eyes."

Within six weeks she was out of her coma, smiling and able to move. "Now she is completely healthy — she graduated from high school recently," says Mayfield.

Wan's prestige among qigong followers around the world has aided the development of this, the most mysterious branch of traditional Chinese medicine. Donations he has received have helped him build a new hospital, which opened in September 1996. Located at the foot of the Western Hills in Beijing, it consists of a teaching center, research block and 20 well-equipped wards.

It is sure to be the base at which many more discoveries concerning the effectiveness of qigong will be made — and a place where disabled people will learn to walk again.

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