

"Winter, a lingering season, is a time to gather golden moments, embark upon a sentimental journey, and enjoy every idle hour." John Boswell



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WHY PRACTICE QIGONG? A CONVERSATION WITH BOBBIE LU-KOPF

The practice of Qigong has been rooted in Chinese culture for over 4000 years, and translates literally to 'life force cultivation'. Bobbie's father introduced her to the elements of Qigong practice (movements, massage, breathing, and meditation) when she was five. "My dad was trying to find a way to keep nine kids out of trouble," says Bobbie, "so he taught us T'ai Chi to keep an eye on us. Qigong was traditionally used as both a warm up and cool down for T'ai Chi and other martial arts, so for my childhood it was always part of a more active practice".

Bobbie fell away from Qigong in her teens, but when she met Heather and started working at Varsity Natural Health Center in her twenties, she became more interested in exploring her traditional roots and embracing Chinese culture. Qigong, with its pervasive reach and transgenerational practitioners, was a perfect gateway. As Bobbie says, now that she was older and practicing Qigong through choice rather than as a family obligation (and as its own practice rather than just as a warm up for T'ai Chi), she "started noticing and appreciating its subtleties and the inherent beauty of the flow of the movements that can bring a sense of centering and calmness. It really puts you in a state of peace".

At VNHC, Bobbie teaches hour-long classes that cover all four elements – movements, massage, breathing, and meditation – of Qigong, but in her private practice she's far more piecemeal. "Qigong is really a set of tools I use to help myself feel better," she says. "There's beauty in spending a full hour working through its stages, but there are also lots of benefits to breaking it up: a few movements or breaths scattered throughout your day or week to help you re-centre, recharge, or relax – whatever you need in the moment".

The physical movements of Qigong work the muscles, joints, and ligaments of the body, but they draw inspiration and imagery from animals and nature. This inspires a flowing gentleness and calmness in the mind, which is why Bobbie says she often describes Qigong as a "moving meditation". The movement 'fly like an eagle', for example, creates an image of powerful wings flapping and soaring through the sky, and while the physical act of raising the heels and arms requires core strength and balance, the fluidity of the motion is deeply soothing and elicits the quiet strength of flight. In her private practice, Bobbie says she uses a couple Qigong movements after a workout session: "I like doing just a few poses to wrap everything up. It re-centres me, and brings a sense of completion to the workout".

The massage element of Qigong is particularly versatile, and is used to increase circulation, to stimulate the lymphatic system, and to decrease tension and pain by increasing chi flow to joints and muscles. There are many areas and techniques of self-massage in Qigong, and each area and pattern of massage is a puzzle piece in the health of the whole body. One of Bobbie's favourites is 'tapping for health', a rhythmic and sequential tapping of the body from head to toe that increases circulation by sending vibrations into the bone marrow, and which is "a great way to warm the body up first thing in the morning!". If your goal is to induce relaxation rather than wakefulness, Bobbie says she uses belly massage to help herself fall asleep, and face and head techniques if she wakes up in the middle of the night, both of which are ways of engaging the parasympathetic nervous system, our 'rest and digest' response.

Similarly, Bobbie often uses Qigong breathing methods to help calm down. "It might not be what ancient practitioners had in mind when they developed these techniques," she laughs, "but 'Qigong Breathing #3' is excellent for reducing road rage!" When practiced outside of the car, Qigong breathing is often combined with meditation. The focus of the breathing is to send air into the belly and diaphragm: deep, slow breaths allow the body to fully relax and the mind to let go by bringing more oxygen to the bloodstream and engaging the parasympathetic nervous system. Done in static postures (either seated or standing), breathing and meditative positions are still inspired by nature imagery like Qigong movements. One of Bobbie's favourites is 'embrace the tree' pose, a time-honoured meditation posture that enhances mindfulness and body awareness. Its rooted nature builds muscular strength while its stillness creates an inner focus, allowing for a mind-body connection by 'letting go' of thoughts and creating a space of expansion through the body.

For Bobbie, a lot of the appeal of Qigong comes from its versatility and flexibility: it's most popular among seniors because of its gentle movements and slow pace, but can benefit everyone and be practiced all sorts of ways. Many practitioners love the routine and ritual of taking an hour to work through all four elements to increase strength, release tension, and calm and centre the mind. For others, knowing how to integrate Qigong elements individually or in combination into their day helps them stay centred and present. As Bobbie says, "all you need to do is commit to a practice – most of Qigong can literally be done anytime and anywhere".