

**Mini Review***Copyright © All rights are reserved by Bernie Warren*

SUNRISE - SUNSET - A Personal Reflection on Aging and Staying Healthy Through Daily Yoga and Qigong Practice

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The practice of Yoga and Qigong has grown as individuals strive to remain healthy as they grow older. This article discusses how daily Yoga and Qigong practice helps to strengthen the body, reduce stress levels, and enhance sense of well-being. It examines some of the problems that injury and the aging process present in this quest to stay healthy and some of the changes the author made to his daily practice to adjust to these problems.

Keywords: Qigong; Yoga; Healthy aging; Retirement; Self-care; Injury; Modifying daily practice

The View from Here - Creating a Context for the Reader

I began my study of Eastern Healing and Martial Arts in 1969. Since that time, I have immersed myself in a continual and progressive study of various forms of Eastern healing practice, internal and external Martial Arts, and the philosophical writings which underpin them. Nowadays, I am considered a Qigong 'Master' and an experienced Yoga practitioner / teacher.

I grew up in England but have now lived in Canada for nearly 40 years. By and large, I have adjusted to the rhythm of the seasons and the much harsher winters here. I have always tried to practice outdoors, as close to natural surroundings as possible, partially because of research on the benefits ascribed to practicing outdoors [1] and because I enjoy the tranquility.

In addition to my Eastern studies, I have studied and read widely on and utilized Western Healthcare Best Practices. In my own personal practice, I pay attention to the connections between the two approaches to health, as they often have much in common, and I emphasize these similarities and connections in my teaching.

Over the years my daily practice has had to change, to accommodate my general aging process and several physical

injuries I have sustained. In this short article I examine some of the problems I faced, and continue to face, and some of the changes I decided to make in my own daily practice, to adjust to these problems so that I may continue to remain healthy as I age.

Same-Same but Different - Some Connections between Yoga [2] and Qigong [3]

Several scholars have suggested that the origins of modern Qigong may be found in Buddhist and Yoga meditation techniques, practiced in India for thousands of years, that were brought to China and absorbed into the Chinese culture. Special mention is made of Bodhidharma (Da Mo), a Buddhist monk, who came from India around 500 A.D. to the Shaolin Temple in China. While this is probably an over-simplification, there are many connecting historical and practical threads between the two practices.

The modern practice of Qigong and Yoga have much in common [4-5]. They are:

- Ancient Eastern forms of exercise
- Involve whole body postures that also engage the mind
- Emphasise breathing techniques

- Teach awareness of body and mind
- Move energy and invoke a meditative state
- Promote overall health and spiritual awareness

Cross Training an Eastern Approach to Daily Practice

Over the years I have studied, practiced, and taught literally hundreds of Martial Arts, Qigong, and Yoga exercises. Around 10 years ago, after a period of focussing primarily on Qigong and Martial Arts, I began to reintroduce Yoga exercises into my weekly routines.

I build my weekly practices around rotating - Qigong/Martial Arts Sets and exercises, with standing, wall and counter-based Yoga stretches. All the sets I practice include mindfulness and meditation. Every day I use different sets and combinations of these Qigong and Yoga exercises in 2-3day rotations. This allows me to cross train my body, working different sets of muscles and strengthening different physiological and immunological facets of my body.

Cutting Your Coat According to Your Cloth Adapting Practice to Aging and Physical Changes

In 1982, I severely injured my spine from a fall. This injury exacerbated neck and knee injuries sustained from playing full contact sports when was younger and thought I was immortal!

Twenty-five years later, I injured my hip. The issue was in part age related but mainly it was aggravated by sitting and driving 50 kms each way to work every day. This created new problems with both knees. I went to see a physiotherapist, who was also my Qigong student at the time. After each session she sent me home with a set of Yoga exercises [6] which I often adapted based on my own knowledge. As mentioned above, these helped me reconnect to the Yoga I had studied several years before.

In 2016, at age 63, I retired early after 35+ years of working as a University professor. Almost overnight, I was no longer running up and down stairs several times a day, nor was I teaching 3-5 hours of movement classes weekly, nor simply walking to and from work. I was doing less daily *unstructured physical activity*, something that has long been linked to increased risks to health and mortality [7-11].

Very soon, I found that aging and retirement had taken their toll. There were exercises that I used to do easily that I could no longer accomplish. My reduced level of activity, coupled with my love of cooking and eating, meant that my weight crept up.

Unfortunately, even five extra pounds made my back and knee injuries worse. Some days, simply getting up and down from the floor for yoga was a challenge. Then, after a vacation, where I drank and ate more than I probably should, the extra weight triggered a major irritation of my old spinal injury. This in turn caused

problems in my hips and I lost feeling in my right leg.

This was the catalyst where I decided I had to take positive action and put my over 50 years of training and research to good use. I had to lose weight and keep it off.

In terms of cooking and eating, I started to measure ingredients more carefully, reduce alcohol consumption, and be especially conscious of food portion size. More importantly, I decided to redesign both the content and patterns of my daily exercise practice, as they were obviously no longer working.

Curly's Rule Do the One Thing Well! Choosing Exercises that Meet Your Needs

I began to streamline my daily practice to better follow Curly's rule: Do the one thing well! Enabled by the time afforded me in retirement, over the past four years I have worked to identify exercises from my vast repertoire that better suited the realities of aging and that took account of my various injuries. When I had several that did basically the same thing, I chose the best exercise for each intended outcome.

I also did extensive research on current best practice to treat my ailments, and on other people's exercises and their purported health benefits. I selected several exercises to explore. If I was able to perform them adequately, and they fit my needs, I integrated them into my practice.

Through this process of research, contemplation, and practical exploration, I continue to cross train my body but from a vastly reduced Qigong and Yoga repertoire of exercises and sets [12]. More details about these exercises, and their benefits, may be found in previous publications [13-16].

Yoda's Rule There Is No Try: Self-Discipline and Finding A Space to Practice

I am very disciplined. I try to perform my daily practice at least once a day. While not always successful in this goal, I have generally averaged 4-5 times a week throughout each year. Some days, when I am feeling "blue" or, "under the weather" - I have to force myself to practice. For I know these are the days I need the practice most!

No matter the weather or the location, I perform my daily practice. Whenever possible I try to find parks or green spaces in which to practice; or failing this, to look at.

On vacation, I will bring my yoga mat or use a blanket to do my floor-based Yoga practice. If available, I use the balcony of my hotel room to perform my Qigong and Martial Arts sets. If the room doesn't have a balcony, I practice indoors clearing furniture to create space. I look out the window, which I open if possible. Ideally, I like to face trees or water, but I practice in whatever space is available, no matter how urban or obstructed the view, or how small the room (in Paris I once practiced in a room in which I could barely walk around the bed).

Sunrise-Sunset: Changing the Rhythm of Daily Practice as One Ages

In my late thirties, I began to realize that my exercises, sets, and sequences were no longer producing the same effects. I began to change my daily practice and have continued to revise and restructure my practice routines every few years. As I have continued to age, and to accommodate to physical restrictions created by weight change and injury, I continue to revise and change.

The location(s) for my practice

- I have stopped going outside during rainy or windy conditions, and Canadian winter.
- Several ancient texts advise against practising in these adverse conditions as it “leaches chi”.
 - i.e. you expend almost as much energy to keep protected from the elements as you create from the exercises being performed.
- Also, some days I felt it took almost as long to put on enough layers of clothing to keep warm or protect against the wind as it did to practice.

The timing and frequency of my daily practice

- When I was working, I tried to do my morning practice ONCE a day for 50-80 minutes. VERY early every morning, before having breakfast and leaving for work.
 - Currently, most days I practice Twice a day usually.
 - 25-40 mins in morning.
 - 25-40 mins in early evening.
- However, I do not stress about performing my daily practice.
 - At a particular time.
 - If I get up later, I do not stress about “getting my exercise in” but rather do my morning practice when I feel like it.
 - Twice a day.
 - If I only manage one session in a day-so be it.

My sets and exercises

- When I was working, I did more martial movements.
- I would practice Bagua/Taiji/Kung Fu twice as much as I did Yoga and Qigong.
- Since retiring I have reduced the emphasis on these martial forms and increased my Yoga and Qigong. Now I place.
- Less focus on locomotion / moving exercises.
- If I need to move, I go for a walk around the neighborhood [17].

- More emphasis on stationary, stretching, and core exercises.
- Even when I do practice moving, martial and physical exercises, I focus on my breathing patterns.

Start from Where You Are

Many people take up Yoga and Qigong as they grow older to try to stay healthy. Qigong and Yoga can be done almost anywhere. Both provide a thorough, non-stressful, and extremely low impact work out for the whole body which requires no special or expensive equipment. Often, people post the accomplishments of their daily practice online. These pictures, especially of beginners and older people, can inspire and encourage others.

However, there are also posts by very fit and healthy individuals of themselves performing extreme postures that focus on the intense physical nature of advanced asanas, or the martial aspects of Qigong. These emphasize physical prowess over ideals of health promotion, spiritual enlightenment, or union with the divine. Worse yet, they may persuade others to try feats beyond their capabilities, which could end in injury.

My Revels are Not Yet Ended

Over the years, and throughout my aging process, I have found that integrating Yoga And Qigong together has helped to strengthen my body, reduce my stress levels and enhance my sense of well-being. Currently, according to my doctors, I am an extremely healthy 66-year-old. I have never required an operation and am on no medications for any of the conditions often associated with aging. I have rarely been sick and on the few occasions I have been, I bounce back faster than normal.

While some of this may be good genes, I attribute my current health to a lifelong healthy lifestyle; a large part of which has been my daily Qigong and Yoga practice. I feel I am a living testament to the value of these exercises.

However, dealing with the inactivity of retirement, and all the extra financial, physical, and mental challenges this has created, has been difficult [18]. I have tried to adjust as best I can. Now, for health reasons, I watch what I eat and try to keep my weight within a manageable target range - because I have found that even five extra pounds aggravates my old injuries.

As I age, I have come to be more relaxed and smarter in my daily practice. I do not try to emulate individuals’ practice posted on social media. I continue to accept my aging process and simply adapt my practice to my changing situation, as best I know how. I can highly recommend this approach to others.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

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