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Interview with Roger Jahnke, OMD, Dipl AC (NCCAOM)


**SG:** What sparked your interest in AOM and Qigong?

**RJ:** When I was 10, my father died of leukemia—he was only 39. I think that was probably the most profound spark. As a child, his death was clearly earlier than I expected. Before that, I really wanted to be a baseball player – I followed the Cincinnati Reds. But not very long after this happened I began to say that I wanted to be a doctor when I grew up. Clearly, that fairly traumatic event had a powerful influence on my life. As a result, I went to premedical school, but I really didn’t like it for a lot of reasons, mostly because it didn’t have anything to do with health or maximizing health. It was all very technological and very pharmaceutical.

In college I shifted my attention to study the literature of all the tribes and nations of the world. One of the first books that we read was the *Tao Te Ching (Dao De Jing)*. In number ten of the *Tao Te Ching* I found what I believe to be some of the most important questions that doctors would ask patients. The first was: Can you quiet your wandering mind and come to understand the true nature of the world? The second was: Do you have regular practice to sustain your flexibility and cultivate your energy? The third was: Can you modify your internal observation to the extent that you experience the presence of inner light?
“In number ten of the Tao Te Ching I found what I believe to be some of the most important questions that doctors would ask patients. The first was: Can you quiet your wandering mind and come to understand the true nature of the world? The second was: Do you have regular practice to sustain your flexibility and cultivate your energy? The third was: Can you modify your internal observation to the extent that you experience the presence of inner light?”

As an aspiring doctor, these were the ideals that I wanted to explore in the first place! These are not questions that an average doctor would ask; however, they contain a lot of information about the energetic nature of the human being as well as the mind-body interaction. So these are, in fact, fairly appropriate medical questions. The last one does not especially sound like a medical question: “Can you observe internally and see the light of your original nature?” However, it reflects on the Qi as light and suggests that an individual is more than a body and mind.

I ended up pursuing Chinese medicine, including acupuncture (AOM), in part because of the fact that Lao Tzu, the author of the Tao Te Ching, was an early founder of Chinese science including medicine. As a result, for the past 30 years I have practiced as a clinical Chinese doctor. Through that process I realized that it wasn’t as much my key interest to treat people who wanted a doctor to “fix” them, but instead I wanted to be in relationships with people who understood the true nature of their being as suggested in Lao Tzu’s number ten. That took me into Tai Chi (Tai Ji) and then Qigong – both ancient and contemporary – as the essence and source of Chinese medicine.

SG: Will you speak about the origin of Qigong in China?

RJ: The roots of Qigong penetrate deeply into Shamanic ritual and the honoring of the power of nature, well before there was written history about it. When people practice Qigong today a very typical and often very immediate sense arises of something greater than one’s “usual” self. Tapping into what we call the “Qigong state” puts a person into a special non-usual physiological, emotional and mental state; you could call this a focused “mind-body state.” It’s triggered by Qigong’s unique and powerful combined engagement of the body, the breath, and the mind all at once. In Qigong this is achieved in a very purposeful way that is quite striking and very obvious to most people.

The experience of this very special mind-body state is something that we in the Western world don’t know a whole lot about. Even in ancient China it was a knowledge base restricted to monks and the ministers of the Imperial Court. The phrase, “Secrets of the Qi Masters,” is a common phrase in Chinese history because only certain people had access to the kind of information that would make them a Qi master. However, the illusion exists that these are very impossible or hard-to-achieve states. That’s not true. It’s very simple to get into the Qigong state using what is called the “Three Intentful Corrections” or “Three Mindful Points of Focus.” These are the body focus, the breath focus, and the mind focus. When a person learns how to coordinate body, breath, and mind purposefully they will spontaneously go into the Qigong state and have these special experiences of body and mind called “Qi Phenomena.”

SG: You served on the original board for the NIH Mind-Body Advisory Committee. When did that start and how has it changed public awareness around Qigong and Tai Chi in the U.S.?

RJ: For several years the NIH had an onsite wellness program for NIH staff. The name of that wellness program over time became Mind-Body Week. I was asked to be on the advisory council in 2009.

Now, two years later, what is called Mind-Body Week D.C. was recently held. This is no longer an NIH event but a public event in the D.C region which is sponsored by an organization called the Mindfulness Center in Bethesda, MD. There were, however, people at the Mind-Body Week event from the NIH, and a number of them gave excellent presentations.

I gave the keynote for the opening event of the Mind-Body Week D.C., which was a great honor for me. The other keynote was Herbert Benson, MD from Harvard, who is considered to be the grandfather of mind-body medicine. This is a very high-profile event which I think in coming years will become even more influential on D.C. policy. The original Advisory Council for the NIH has disbanded in part, I believe, as a political reaction to the momentum of public interest in non-medical solutions. But there is this emerging new mind-body initiative focused in D.C. which I think will continue to evolve and have a much wider-reaching effect than an NIH staff wellness program.

SG: Would you briefly talk about the presentation that you gave?

RJ: Absolutely! The focus of my keynote was two things: first, addressing the national financial crisis by simply preventing diseases that are widely known to be preventable and, second, demonstrating the necessity for the nation-wide proliferation of mind-body practices. The title of my presentation was “The Necessity for the Proliferation of Mind-Body Practice in America.” It is widely known that over 70% of all disease is preventable. In the year 2012 we’re going to be spending $3 trillion dollars a year. Seventy percent of that is spent treating preventable diseases. That is striking! The theory that I discussed in my presentation is this: by proliferating mind-body practice – Yoga, Qigong, Tai Chi – people (citizens) have the capacity to prevent diseases with simple personal activity. This, along with some simple nutritional changes, could potentially reduce the waste of the money spent treating those preventable diseases. It’s a very powerful and compelling argument, and the fuel for this comes from Chinese medicine. The origin of Chinese medicine, as you know, is the theory of the presence of Qi in the universe, nature, and human beings. People can get a treatment (i.e., acupuncture, herbal prescription, or massage) to maximize their Qi, but for a price. However, citizens can also cultivate and
maximize their Qi – enhance the functionality of natural physiological mechanisms – by practicing Qigong and Tai Chi. This doesn’t cost anything once people have learned how to do it. Wherever you are, it’s free every time you practice Qi cultivation!

SG: You authored a paper that was published in the American Journal of Health Promotion (AJHP) entitled A Comprehensive Review of Health Benefits of Qigong and Tai Chi. Please discuss your findings.

RJ: First, we found that Qigong and Tai Chi are equivalent in terms of their clinical effect. The second thing that we found is that Qigong and Tai Chi have no negative effects or outcomes. Across all of the randomized controlled trials (RCTs), Qigong and Tai Chi were found to be safe and effective. The extent to which they were effective was different depending on the length of time practiced and how severe the illnesses were. In other findings we discovered that Qigong and Tai Chi were equivalent in efficiency to enhancing physical function (recovery from the symptoms of disease) compared with any of the “controls” used in these trials. Some of these “control” activities include something as simple as reading a book about a healthy topic or doing other more vigorous exercises. That’s a very powerful finding.

The AJHP article has become the reference point for the “evidence base” for Qigong and Tai Chi and was reported on ABC News. Within the RCTs that met the criteria to be included in the review there are nine particular areas of influence including cardiovascular disease, prevention of falling, bone density, immune function and neurological disorders including stress, anxiety, depression, and other more severe types of disorders such as Parkinson’s, and so forth. Also included in the article is a table of all the studies we analyzed. Finally, the article suggested ways to improve the research process. There’s a whole section of the review that addresses how to design research in the future that will lead to even more significant findings.

SG: How could AOM practitioners incorporate Qigong as an additional tool to help their patients?

RJ: I love this question, because it’s actually really easy to do. This was the subject of my keynote and workshop at the May, 2011, AAOM annual event. First of all, in the language of Chinese medicine we can pretty much exchange the phrase “enhancing functionality” and “enhancing Qi.” When a clinician says, “We’re going to balance your Qi,” this also means “We’re going to balance your function.” Clinicians choose what they will discuss during the patient’s visit. It is just as easy to discuss the relevance of personal mind-body practice as it is to discuss the esoterics of Chinese medicine or engage in small talk that often takes place with medical visits.

Everything a doctor of Chinese medicine could be speaking about with their patients that inspires personal health improvement is easy to say and easy for the patient to understand. For example, we might say, “What I’m finding is there’s an imbalance in the energetics of—or the function of—your liver and your gallbladder...” The doctor can easily say, “Typically in Chinese medicine there’s not only the treatment, but also there’s a simple set of exercises or mind-body practices that I can show you.”

In addition, you can say, “I can treat you, but I can also inspire and support you with knowledge.” A Chinese medicine practitioner can share important information about nourishment, rest, stress, and both physical and emotional resiliency. In this conversation a practitioner can also discuss that there is a whole body of knowledge in China about maximizing function through the practice of what are called Qigong and Tai Chi. You, the doctor, can say to the patient, “We can actually do some practice of this while you’re having this treatment.”

One way that I teach clinicians to initiate Qigong into the physician-patient interaction is by showing an individual how easy it is for them to choose to change their breath pattern, anytime except during sleep. There is an especially easy time to do this – as soon as one awakens in the morning or just before going to sleep at night. Qigong is a breath practice. It is also a body practice. We have the opportunity to change our posture almost moment to moment while lying, sitting, standing, or walking. Qigong is also a process for cultivating the capacity to change the focus of the mind. How many people would benefit from a reminder from their doctor about the power of developing the capacity to purposefully select the focus of their mind? All of this is easy to discuss with a patient once their assessment is complete.

Of course, people are largely focused on what’s wrong with their lives, and so they are not inclined to cultivate the ability to guide or control their minds. They are much busier worrying. They’re not deciding what to think about. Most people are just going along with what the mind is already spontaneously doing, usually as a result of lifelong conditioning. A major part of Qigong is to learn how to choose – and to cultivate – the capacity to choose what one is focusing on.

So without teaching an actual Qigong practice, we can say, “Here are some things that you can do during your day which are the kinds of things that are a part of what we call Qigong – a mind-body practice that is respected worldwide.” This is easy and takes no extra time. It is largely a process wherein the clinician decides to bring the principles of Qigong right into the treatment room and the dialogue with the patient.
Then, the second thing that the doctor can do is to actually teach the person how to practice Qigong right there, while they’re in the treatment room. Many doctors, not just Chinese doctors but also chiropractors, osteopaths, naturopaths, medical doctors, as well as Chinese medicine doctors, use one of my books, *The Healer Within* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), to support their patients in developing a personal wellness practice. This book includes the Four Baskets of Qigong Practice – movements, breath practices, self-massage, and meditation practices – all based on Chinese medical Qigong.

Another thing that a clinical practitioner can do, and this is absolutely something that I did in my practice, is hold a weekly Qigong or Tai Chi practice session. Here in Santa Barbara, weekly at 10:30 on Wednesday mornings since 1982, there has been a community practice session, which is very inexpensive. I led this every week for years, and now that I’m traveling and lecturing a lot, there are other people who are trainees of the Institute of Integral Qigong and Tai Chi who lead that session.

So, clinicians (doctors, nurses, massage therapists, physical therapists) can use the language of Qigong during the session, be a teacher of Qigong in their community on a regular basis, teach Qigong as a part of the patient’s session, and send people to practice Qigong in the community (the park, spa, YMCA, community center). For practitioners this is a beautiful way to “add value” and communicate with people who are clients or may become clients – this is good public relations. Patients will say, “My doctor not only gives treatments, she teaches me how to speed up my healing and prevent disease.” It’s also a way to have people learn more about Chinese medicine and understand that the doctor believes in health care as well as medical treatment. As a result, when they think about needing medical treatment they’re much more likely to choose someone they know.

SG: Those are some great ideas. One thing I have observed from reviewing your book, *The Healer Within*, is that the ideas and exercises that you present are very accessible. For a practitioner who might not have that much hands-on experience with Qigong, they could use this book and soon have a handful of self-healing tools that they can share with their patients.

RJ: Exactly.

SG: What are you and your colleagues doing to accelerate the presence of these practices throughout our society?

RJ: Ah yes, that’s one of my favorite questions. The Institute of Integral Qigong and Tai Chi (IIQTC) was founded in 2000. We founded it in that year as an acknowledgement of the new millennium and the whole concept of empowering people to practice Qigong and Tai Chi. We have trained almost 1,000 teachers and practice leaders. In addition, we are now working with an organization called The Healer Within Foundation. This Foundation is managing and sponsoring a project called the Nationwide Dissemination Project for Tai Chi Easy. Tai Chi Easy is a little bit of Tai Chi and a little bit of Qigong that we can teach to “Practice Leaders” who will then teach individuals who would not otherwise have access to these things. The Institute of Integral Qigong and Tai Chi is collaborating with The Healer Within Foundation to proliferate these practices.

We are constantly working hard at the Institute of Integral Qigong and Tai Chi to create opportunities for a wider number of people to be exposed to these self-empowering, self-healing methodologies that we call Qigong and Tai Chi. In fact we have a phrase – a kind of mantra – that goes like this: “We train thousands to inspire millions to heal themselves for free.”

That’s a pretty big claim. We have already trained over 1,000 teachers and practice leaders, and now we’re moving forward to training our next thousand. The people that we’ve trained have already inspired tens of thousands of people in the U.S. and internationally, and we’re progressing with inspiring millions. It’s very exciting.

The research that we do, the public events, the books that I write, and the Facebook pages are all focused on this big vision of inspiring the public to recover self-reliance – a kind of revolution of health independence. We respect that a grand historic value of America is self-reliance, but self-reliance has been lost, especially in today’s healthcare. We’re nourishing the recovery of self-reliance through the wellness system of Chinese medicine – true health care (caring for health). We’re actually proposing that the citizens of this country, using Qigong, Tai Chi, Yoga, meditation, proper nutrition, proper rest, and healthy relationships and so forth, will actually be able to save a couple of trillion dollars a year that we are now wasting treating preventable diseases. So we’re actually pretty busy having an influence on the society.

Chinese medicine is transforming medicine in the Western world. At least as important as acupuncture and herbal medicine is the wellness system of Chinese medicine – including Qigong and Tai Chi.