

THE OPEN MIND – Winter Edition



ADD PROTECTION: QI GONG BOOSTS IMMUNITY

A recent review of several studies found that practicing qigong has a noticeable impact on immune functioning. It increased levels of certain immune cells in people who practiced it regularly.

(Source: Cleveland Clinic)

Since the pandemic rages on, consider adding qi gong to your health and disease prevention regimen!

Ongoing Classes:

Tuesdays 10 am, Crows End Retreat Center 6430 Squire Ct
San Luis Obispo. <https://crowsendretreat.business.site>

Fridays 10:30 am, Tidelands Park, Morro Bay.

New beach class starting in Cayucos soon!

ALSO: Online class **"Writing Through The Storm"**, exploring how to use expressive writing for self discovery and healing will be offered on

ZOOM this winter. Dates & times TBA.

Call (805) 709-2227 or email devinwalla@gmail.com for full details on classes.

UPCOMING TALKS

1. Papanca and the Plague

White Heron Sangha, Sun. January 30, 2022, 6 pm. Live or on Zoom.

Access at: www.whiteheronsangha.org. 6615 Bay Laurel Pl.

Avila Beach, CA

The Pali term *papanca*, which was used by the Buddha, is usually defined as the tendency of the mind to respond to perceptions by "spiraling out" -- engaging in conceptual proliferation.

One fruit of *papanca* is the generation of recurrent worrisome thoughts. The COVID plague, quite understandably, has greatly multiplied that tendency.

Which raises the question: When is worry helpful (protective, instructive, motivational) and when is it not (pain-producing *papanca*)? And -- How do we discern and skillfully deal with the two forms?

Tonight we'll explore those questions with exercises and discussion.

2. Intro to Qi Gong - "The Way To Age Gracefully"

Cayucos Public Library -- 310 B St, Cayucos. Thursdays January 27, and February 24, 2022 at 1:00 pm.

Since it focuses particularly on exercising the parts of the body that tend to wear out as we grow older, and also on cultivating energy, vitality and wisdom, qi gong can make aging a much more positive experience! Come find out why in these participatory sessions.

*FACING THE TWO-HEADED DRAGON NAMED **STRESS***

A big part of my work teaching qi gong and applied meditation – as well as doing hypnotherapy – is helping people to relax, to reduce their stress. We all hold tension within us, and it can wear us down in multiple ways. But there is another side to the “stress story” which needs to be considered if we are to have a complete understanding.

Back in the 1980's, while working as Director of Education for the Stroke Association of Southern California, I did a lot of public speaking around Los Angeles County on the topic of Stress Reduction. At the time, stress was being blamed for about every human affliction imaginable. This scapegoating was originally inspired by the work of Hungarian endocrinologist Hans Seyle, who beginning in the late 1930's, had subjected rats to various kinds of torture and studied the effects. Effects which, not too surprisingly, were genuinely dreadful! This led Seyle, who previously had been a physician, to conclude that human beings, in facing the stresses of ordinary life, would be affected similarly.

A mindset developed in the culture that suggested we had to eliminate or at least greatly minimize stress in order to be healthy, both physically and psychologically. This led to a "throw the baby out with the bathwater" approach, essentially demonizing stress. (And, sadly, this likely made many people shy away from doing things they strongly wanted to do in life because of the fear of stressing themselves out in the process.)

Later studies, conducted with people instead of rats, have turned a lot of Seyle's conclusions on their heads. As Stanford psychologist Kelly McGonigal explains in her groundbreaking book, "The Upside of Stress", the story of how things work is much more complicated. Yes, unrelenting or chronic stress can and does take a huge toll on health and wellbeing, but not all stress is bad for us. In fact, research has shown that, if we learn to view it differently -- which can enable us to process & experience it differently, it can often empower rather than disempower us.

Here are some of the benefits gained through the Stress Response (and the chemicals it produces) in both body and mind. It has been found to:

***focus attention**

***heighten the senses**

***increase motivation**

***help us feel a connection with others (empathy/compassion)**

***dampen fear and increase courage**

***restore nervous system balance after it's been thrown off**

***process and integrate experience, promoting learning**

If those positive aspects of stress are indeed part of the picture, how do we reconcile that with the other side of the equation? When stress becomes "distress", it can bring on or worsen a number of serious symptoms or diseases. It also can drive people to seek relief by turning to food, alcohol, drugs and/or other unhealthy compulsive behaviors which only serve to exacerbate stress.

Perhaps the best place to start in developing "skillful means" in dealing with stress is to acknowledge and accept its yin & yang nature. Instead of thinking stress is only bad or only good, we can recognize that it carries pieces of both within it, and so requires us to more mindfully observe and feel how it affects us in different circumstances.

Here is Dr. McGonigal's advice in that regard. *"Whatever the sensations of stress are, worry less about trying to make them go away, and focus more on what you are going to do with the energy, strength and drive that stress gives you. Your body is providing you access to all your resources to help you rise to this challenge. Instead of taking a deep breath to calm down, take a deep breath to sense the energy that is available to you. Then put the energy to use, and ask yourself: What action can I take or what choice can I make that is consistent with my goal in this moment?" (EXTRA TIP – When you hear your self talk saying "I'm feeling stressed", change the message to "I'm feeling excited.")*

This advice doesn't mean there aren't times we should take calming breaths, to intentionally slow the breath, to intentionally slow down the torrent of thought & emotional energy that is causing suffering. That should be an essential part of common sense self care. Rather, it

means that we can learn to distinguish between the times we can risk "riding the dragon" and those times when we need to tame or escape from it. Is that difficult to do? Yes! But think of how liberating its accomplishment would feel. No longer would we automatically flee or shut down or dread the moment when stress first arises. We could read it somewhat like experts read the wind, and have better choices available to us on how we react to the stimulus.

It doesn't mean we should stick with highly stressful jobs or relationships or activities if they truly are proving toxic to us (remember, chronic stress is an entirely different ballgame!). It also doesn't mean we need to try and put a happy face on the intense stress we are feeling now from such things as the global pandemic or the climate crisis. Some stress that arises, like it or not, is going to be hard on us -- and it seems to me that it will require us to circle back to asking ourselves Kelly's key question: "What action can I take or what choice can I make that is consistent with my goal in this moment?"

And perhaps even ask another question: "How can I view this "stressor" as somehow instructive, as a wisdom-maker, a resilience-maker, a compassion & empathy generator?" Then I believe we could learn to live more gracefully with that two-headed creature we call STRESS.

WINTER REFLECTION

The season of winter is when our attention moves inward, and that provides an opportunity to meditate on what qualities we wish to cultivate. For me, I am noticing an unmistakable lack of patience. So I've been contemplating a quote from our just departed South African peacemaker, Desmond Tutu: ***"The universe can take quite a while to deliver."***