

Your Excellency Mrs Ambassador, ladies and gentlemen, I am delighted to be the Honorary President of the Belgian Health Qigong federation and to be tonight here with you all.

I was introduced to the practice of Qigong through friendship. Two years ago, indeed, my dear friend Anne de Lichtervelde shared with me her enthusiasm and showed me some exercises. I was immediately drawn to the harmony of the movements and the feeling of relaxation and tranquillity that it brought to the whole atmosphere.

My friend's movements were fluid and continuous, shifting weight from one foot to the other, balancing the forces of yin and yang. The strong, masculine force of yang with the soft and feminine force of yin. In Qigong, the movements change from yin to yang and back again, which is believed to reconcile the two forces internally. The movements were coordinated with breathing. It was rhythmical, almost like a dance and extremely peaceful.

Each time I have watched people practicing Qigong or Tai Chi in China or recently in Vietnam, I have experienced the same feeling of energy and harmony. The connection between body and mind.

Qigong emphasises this coordination. Therefore, it not only reduces stress and improves our physical coordination, balance and awareness, but our mind becomes clearer and more focused.

These ancient, flowing exercises which started thousand years ago in China are often referred as "meditation in motion". In Chinese philosophy, every illness is considered the result of a disturbance, imbalance, blockage or deficiency in the natural flow of energy throughout the body. Qigong involves performing movements that stimulate the flow of Qi (force of energy), helping blood flow to get to all the muscles of the body. This allows quicker healing and improved health, as oxygen and nutrients can reach the places they are needed. Not only do they improve muscle tone, flexibility and coordination, they also relax our minds and can slow down the physical signs of ageing.

One of the great advantages is that you don't need to be athletic to do Qi Gong. The movements are as hard as you want them to be. It can be a gentle moving meditation or more challenging depending on the health and fitness of the person. Because of this, it can be used as an alternative exercise for older people, those with physical limitations or chronic pain.

For some people it might not look as stimulating as jogging or training at the gym, but Qigong requires a lot of self-discipline and concentration. As for yoga and meditation, you have to be fully present in the moment. Once you manage to shut off the mind without force, the feeling is powerful.

Research in recent years has shown that meditative practices, including Qigong, may be important for optimal brain function, as well as for reducing stress. In the UK, scientists have published a review of the benefits of meditation to prevent depression. We all know how emotions and thoughts have a great impact on our health. Taking control of our mind is essential, in particular when recovering from illness. A famous Chinese quote tells us: "The mind is driven by the emotions like a horse being ridden by a wild ape. The secret is to drive away the ape and tether and control the horse." But another wise Chinese man also said: " It is not easy to train the mind. Most of the time, we are unable to control it, yet if you can solve problems in your mind, you can solve all problems. "

As the world population grows older and we experience greater number of diseases, it becomes evident that, together with the tools of modern medicine, we need complementary exercises of the body and mind to increase our mobility and flexibility and help us recover our good health. Many patients say that it has helped them to relieve the stiffness that comes with old age as well as the aches and pains and anxiety. They practice Qigong to maintain health, heal their bodies and calm their minds. They have a more positive outlook on life, a more balanced life style, which brings them greater harmony, stability, and enjoyment.

For my part, I am convinced and I will, definitively, start practicing soon!