

EASTERN PROMISES

Harness the wisdom of ancient cultures to boost and balance energy.

BY MAURA RHODES

When you hear the word “energy,” what comes to mind? The instant jolt you get from a double espresso? The physical stamina to push through a workout? The ability to stay mentally focused to meet a deadline?

Sure, but there’s another way to think about energy, too: According to healing arts and mind-body practices rooted in ancient Eastern traditions, energy is more than the fuel we get from food and expend with activity. From acupuncture to yoga, these traditions regard energy as a life force that circulates in the human body at all times, a “subtle energy” essential to overall health and vitality.

In traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), this energy is called *qi* (pronounced “chee” and sometimes spelled *chi*); it’s believed to flow through the body along pathways called meridians. Similarly, Ayurveda, a holistic healing system from India, is based on the belief that *prana* permeates the body via a network

of *nadis*—like electricity travels on wires—and is concentrated in areas of the body called *chakras*. For Japanese healers, life force energy is called *ki*.

Practitioners of healing arts believe illness and pain result from obstruction of subtle energy, and that optimal health, well-being and vitality depend on its free flow. Healing practices like acupuncture and Reiki aim to treat illness and pain and to restore and support health by releasing blocked energy. So do they?

It appears so. “There’s so much we can’t explain scientifically, but we can wrap our head around the big picture,” says Tiffany Cruikshank, L.Ac, MAOM, RYT, founder of Yoga Medicine. “In clinical studies and in the context of real life, people report feeling revived and having more energy after receiving energy-based treatment or engaging in a practice like yoga or qigong.”

More than that, there’s increasing evidence that certain ancient

Sitting in the cross-legged, Sukhasana position can foster a calm, meditative state.

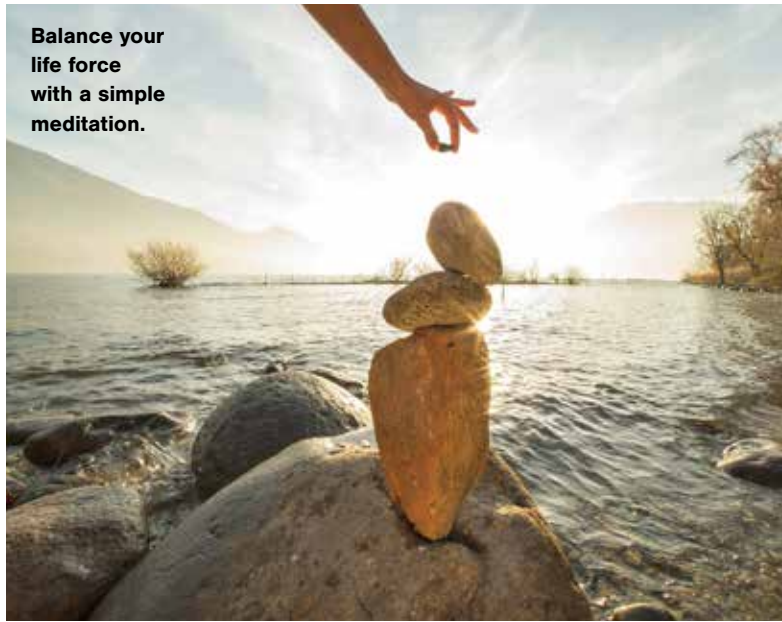


practices have measurable medical benefits. Acupuncture, for example, has been shown to be so effective in relieving low back pain that Medicare has begun to cover it for this purpose.

The fact that practitioner-based energy treatment is being recognized as a valuable part of medical treatment is all well and good. But equally compelling is that it isn't necessary to put yourself in the hands—literally or figuratively—of a practitioner. “Understanding what energy is and how it moves in the body can offer practical benefits in your daily life,” according to Omega, a Rhinebeck, New York-based nonprofit organization committed to holistic studies.

In other words: We all have within ourselves the power to harness, manage and manipulate our own subtle energy. How we do that is a matter of preference. “The trick is knowing when we need an energy boost to power through an activity and when we need rest to restock our energy stores. We get energized from movement, but we also need to rest and restore,” points out Cruikshank. “Like athletes, we as humans push ourselves to the same boundaries, but unlike athletes, we don't think about recovery and performance.”

The other trick is finding what works for you. There's no one-size-fits-all prescription, and you can get similar benefits from different options (see “Energy Practices” on page 77). “If you look deeply at many of these practices, take the lessons and the anatomy charts and so forth and overlay them, you'll see it's all essentially the same thing,” says Audrey Christie, RN, MSN, who combines conventional allopathic medicine with a variety of Eastern healing methods such as energy work and aromatherapy in her Lake Dallas, Texas, practice. “The key to using any of it yourself is finding what resonates with you and what you can make a habit and stick to.”



Balance your life force with a simple meditation.

ONE-MINUTE MEDITATION FOR A QUICK RECHARGE

You may think meditation is more likely to leave you languid than invigorated. In fact, it's a surprisingly effective way to recharge. “Meditation switches on the calming parasympathetic branch of the nervous system, allowing the arousing sympathetic branch to rest and come back ‘online’ refreshed,” explains Dean Sluyter, author of *Natural Meditation*. You can get the bounce-back benefits of meditation in just a minute or so. Sluyter recommends trying this simple practice for when your energy is flagging but you still need to push through:

- 1 Sit comfortably with your eyes open or closed.
- 2 Breathe in and out as normal, imagining that you're breathing through the soles of your feet.
- 3 Naturally, sounds, thoughts, feelings and sensations will be present. That's fine. Don't try to clear them away—just let them be there in the background, and any time you notice you've forgotten about the breath, simply and easily come back to it.

Sluyter encourages meditating regularly to maintain your energy levels and stay centered. “Over time, meditation trains the nervous system to more smoothly integrate the sympathetic [energizing] and parasympathetic [calming] functions,” he explains, using this analogy: “For a race car to run at top speed without blowing a gasket, it has to start with an engine that runs cool.” To benefit from a free ultracooling 12-minute guided meditation track, go to the “Meditate Now” page at deansluyter.com.

ENERGY PRACTICES

and How They Work

There are many ways to benefit from energy work, whether through practitioner-based treatment or self-powered practices. Here's a sampling:

ACUPUNCTURE An important tool in traditional Chinese medicine, acupuncture uses slender needles inserted into the body where the flow of energy is blocked, contributing to pain, illness or stress. Acupressure, which doesn't require a practitioner, uses the same trigger points.

TAI CHI An ancient Chinese martial art that coordinates slow, deliberate movement with breathing to “cultivate the qi or life energy within

us to flow smoothly and powerfully throughout the body,” according to the Tai Chi for Health Institute.

QIGONG Like tai chi, qigong is a mind-body practice with roots in ancient China that strives to balance and enhance the flow of qi in the body.

REIKI This Japanese healing technique is based on a similar idea. Rei means “higher power” and ki is synonymous with life force energy—

Reiki is regarded as spiritually guided life force energy. In practice, a Reiki master transmits healing energy by holding their hands in a series of positions on or near a person's body.

YOGA A mind-body practice that has taken on many forms, all of which turn on combining movement in the form of poses, or *asanas*, with breath work, or *pranayama*, in order to promote the healthy balance of *prana*, or life force, in the body.



Tai chi is a low-impact martial art that's great for beginners.



GET TO THE POINTS ACUPRESSURE FOR A QUICK PICK-ME-UP

Acupressure stimulates specific points on the body to unblock congested energy centers and allow for the flow of *qi* (life force). These are the same points used in acupuncture, but unlike acupuncture, you can perform acupressure on yourself. Two trigger points to try:

K27, Shu Fu (“Transport Mansion”) This acupressure point along the kidney meridian targets adrenal fatigue, explains Audrey Christie, RN, MSN, CCMA. K27 is an indentation on the inside corner of the collarbone near the midline of the chest and down a couple of finger-widths. “Give it a really good peck with three fingers or massage it a few times to flip the energies in the proper direction,” says Christie, “and you will notice an immediate increase in focus—and it perks up your energy.”

S36, Zu San Li (“Leg Three Mile Point”) “History holds that fatigued soldiers [who were] expected to march 3 additional miles used this point to re-energize,” says Kerry Boyle, MS, LAc, founder of Integrative Acupuncture of Montpelier in Vermont. This point is located on the outside of the leg, a hand’s width below the kneecap and just off the bone. To stimulate it, says Boyle, “apply direct pressure with your finger. It should feel a little dull and achy. Make small circles with your finger for 30 seconds. For best effects, do this every day. The more your body is subjected to this type of stimulation, the more readily it will respond.”

BHASTRIKA PRANAYAMA A BREATH OF FRESH ENERGY

Pranayamas are an important component of yoga. *Prana* means breath, life, vitality, energy; *ayama* means length, expansion or restraint. Therefore, according to *Light on Yoga* by B.K.S. Iyengar, pranayama is “the science of breath. It is the hub round which the wheel of life revolves.”

The pranayama believed to be the most energizing is *bhastrika*, which means “bellows.” The breathing pattern mimics how air is forced in and out of a bellows. Bhastrika pranayama is nicknamed “yogic coffee” because it’s believed to perk you up as effectively as downing a cup of joe.

To do bhastrika pranayama, sit comfortably on the floor or a mat with your legs crossed, or in a chair. Take one long breath in and out to settle down, and then begin to breathe in and out rapidly and forcefully through your nose, using your diaphragm to power each breath.

One inhalation plus one exhalation equals one round of breath. Start with 10 rounds, then rest. Work up to one full minute.

The yogic tradition regards air, or breath, as the most subtle form of energy. Expanding and restraining the breath in controlled ways can impact energy levels and other measures of well-being.

